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  - Charlie's Dodge
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  - Evensong
  - The Ehrengraf Obligation
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    - Worthy of His Hire by Horace Bull[8]
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The Deadly Egg
by *Janwillem van de Wetering*[1]

The first Grijpstra-de Gier short story by Janwillem van de Wetering

As of the time of this writing Janwillem van de Wetering has written six novels about the Amsterdam police, featuring Detective Adjutant Grijpstra and Detective Sergeant de Gier. The novels have been highly praised by critics, have sold to eleven foreign publishers, have been serialized and selected by book clubs; a motion picture is now in production in Holland, with the prospect of an American movie soon.

Mr. van de Wetering was born in The Netherlands in 1931. The German bombing of Rotterdam and the subsequent five years of military occupation strongly influenced his early thinking. After graduation from a business college he traveled extensively — Africa, South America, Australia, Japan. He studied philosophy in London and became a disciple of a Zen master in Kyoto, Japan, later writing two books on Zen.

In 1965 he returned to The Netherlands where he became an active member of the Special Constabulary of the Amsterdam Municipal Police (so he knows at first-hand what he's writing about). He and his family at present live in the United States.

Now, meet for the first time in a short story (but not for the last time, we hope) the most famous pair of detectives in the Criminal Investigation Department (also called the Murder Brigade) of the Municipal Police of Amsterdam — Adjutant Grijpstra and Sergeant de Gier, two of the most human sleuths you have ever encountered in print. The crime they investigate on Easter Day is a fascinating double mystery — "a dead man dangling from a branch in the forest" and "a lady poisoned, presumably by a chocolate Easter egg"...

❖

The siren of the tiny dented Volkswagen shrieked forlornly between the naked trees of the Amsterdam Forest, the city's largest park, set on its southern edge: several square miles of willows, poplars, and wild growing alders, surrounding ponds and lining paths. The paths were restricted to pedestrians and cyclists, but the Volkswagen had ignored the many No Entry signs, quite legally for the vehicle belonged to the Municipal Police and more especially to its Criminal Investigation Department, or the Murder Brigade. Even so it

looked lost and its howl seemed defensive.

It was Easter Sunday and it rained, and the car's two occupants, Detective Adjutant Grijpstra and Detective Sergeant de Gier, sat hunched in their overcoats, watching the squeaky rusted wipers trying to deal with the steady drizzle. The car should have been junked some years before, but the adjutant had lost the form that would have done away with his aging transport, lost it on purpose and with the sergeant's consent. They had grown fond of the Volkswagen, of its shabbiness and its ability to melt away in traffic.

But they weren't fond of the car now. The heater didn't work, it was cold, and it was early. Not yet nine o'clock on a Sunday is early, especially when the Sunday is Easter. Technically they were both off-duty, but they had been telephoned out of warm beds by Headquarters' radio room. A dead man dangling from a branch in the forest; please, would they care to have a look at the dead man?

Grijpstra's stubby index finger silenced the siren. They had followed several miles of winding paths so far and hadn't come across anything alive except tall blue herons, fishing in the ponds and moats and flapping away slowly when the car came too close for their comfort.

"You know who reported the corpse? I wasn't awake when the radio room talked to me."

De Gier had been smoking silently. His handsome head with the perfect curls turned obediently to face his superior. "Yes, a gentleman jogger. He said he jogged right into the body's feet. Gave him a start. He ran all the way to the nearest telephone booth, phoned headquarters, then headquarters phoned us, and that's why we are here, I suppose. I am a little asleep myself — we are here, aren't we?"

They could hear another siren, and another. Two limousines came roaring toward the Volkswagen, and Grijpstra cursed and made the little car turn off the path and slide into a soggy lawn; they could feel its wheel sink into the mud.

The limousines stopped and men poured out of them; the men pushed the Volkswagen back on the path.

"Morning, Adjutant, morning, Sergeant. Where is the corpse?"

"Shouldn't you know too?"

"No, Adjutant," several men said simultaneously, "but we thought maybe you know. All we know is that the corpse is in the Amsterdam Forest and that this is the Amsterdam Forest."

Grijpstra addressed the sergeant. "You know?"

De Gier's well modulated baritone chanted the instructions. "Turn right after the big pond, right again, then left. Or the other way round. I think I have it right, we should be close."

The three cars drove about for a few minutes more until they

were waved down by a man dressed in what seemed to be long blue underwear. The jogger ran ahead, bouncing energetically, and led them to their destination. The men from the limousines brought out their boxes and suitcases, then cameras clicked and a videorecorder hummed. The corpse hung on and the two detectives watched it hang.

"Neat," Grijpstra said, "very neat. Don't you think it is neat?"

The sergeant grunted.

"Here. Brought a folding campstool and some nice new rope, made a perfect noose, slipped it around his neck, kicked the stool. Anything suspicious, gentlemen?"

The men from the limousines said there was not. They had found footprints — the prints of the corpse's boots. There were no other prints, except the jogger's. The jogger's statement was taken, he was thanked and sent on his sporting way. A police ambulance arrived and the corpse was cut loose, examined by doctor and detectives, and carried off. The detectives saluted the corpse quietly by inclining their heads.

"In his sixties," the sergeant said, "well dressed in old but expensive clothes. Clean shirt. Tie. Short gray beard, clipped. Man who took care of himself. A faint smell of liquor — he must have had a few to give him courage. Absolutely nothing in his pockets. I looked in the collar of his shirt — no laundry mark. He went to some trouble to be nameless. Maybe something will turn up when they strip him at the mortuary; we should phone in an hour's time."

Grijpstra looked hopeful. "Suicide?"

"I would think so. Came here by himself, no traces of anybody else. No signs of a struggle. The man knew what he wanted to do, and did it, all by himself. But he didn't leave a note; that wasn't very thoughtful."

"Right," Grijpstra said, "time for breakfast, Sergeant! We'll have it at the airport — that's close and convenient. We can show our police cards and get through the customs' barrier; the restaurant on the far side is better than the coffee shop on the near side."

De Gier activated the radio when they got back to the car.

"Male corpse, balding but with short gray beard. Dentures. Blue eyes. Sixty-odd years old. Three-piece blue suit, elegant dark gray overcoat, no hat. No identification."

"Thank you," the radio said.

"Looks very much like suicide. Do you have any missing persons of that description in your files?"

"No, not so far."

"We'll be off for breakfast and will call in again on our way back."

"Echrem," the radio said sadly, "there's something else. Sorry."

De Gier stared at a duck waddling across the path and trailing seven furry ducklings. He began to mumble. Adjutant Grijpstra mumbled with him. The mumbled four-letter words interspersed with mild curses formed a background for the radio's well articulated message. They were given an address on the other side of the city. "The lady was poisoned, presumably by a chocolate Easter egg. The ambulance that answered the distress call just radioed in. They are taking her to hospital. The ambulance driver thought the poison was either parathion, something used in agriculture, or arsenic. His assistant is pumping out the patient's stomach. She is in a bad way but not dead yet."

Grijpstra grabbed the microphone from de Gier's limp hand. "So if the lady is on her way to hospital who is left in the house you want us to go to?"

"Her husband, man by the name of Moozen, a lawyer, I believe."

"What hospital is Mrs. Moozen being taken to?"

"The Wilhelmina."

"And you have no one else on call? Sergeant de Gier and I are supposed to be off-duty for Easter, you know!"

"No," the radio's female voice said, "no, Adjutant. We never have much crime on Easter day, especially not in the morning. There are only two detectives on duty and they are out on a case too — some boys have derailed a streetcar with matches."

"Right," Grijpstra said coldly, "we are on our way."

The old Volkswagen made an effort to jump away, protesting feebly. De Gier was still muttering but had stopped cursing. "Streetcar? Matches?"

"Yes. They take an empty cartridge, fill it with matchheads, then close the open end with a hammer. Very simple. All you have to do is insert the cartridge into the streetcar's rail and when the old tram comes clanging along, the sudden impact makes the cartridge explode. If you use two or three cartridges the explosion may be strong enough to lift the wheel out of the rail. Didn't you ever try that? I used to do it as a boy. The only problem was to get the cartridges. We had to sneak around on the rifle range with the chance of getting shot at."

"No," de Gier said. "Pity. Never thought of it, and it sounds like a good game."

He looked out of the window. The car had left the park and was racing toward the city's center through long empty avenues. There was no life in the huge apartment buildings lining the old city — nobody had bothered to get up yet. Ten o'clock and the citizenry wasn't even considering the possibility of slouching into the kitchen for a first cup of coffee.

But one man had bothered to get up early and had strolled into

the park, carrying his folding chair and a piece of rope to break off the painful course of his life, once and for all. An elderly man in good but old clothes. De Gier saw the man's beard again, a nicely cared-for growth. The police doctor had said that he hadn't been dead long. A man alone in the night that would have led him to Easter, a man by himself in a deserted park, testing the strength of his rope, fitting his head into the noose, kicking the campstool.

"Bah!" he said aloud.

Grijpstra had steered the car through a red light and was turning the wheel.

"What's that?"

"Nothing. Just bah."

"Bah is right," Grijpstra said.

They found the house, a bungalow, on the luxurious extreme north side of the city. Spring was trying to revive the small lawn and a magnolia tree was in hesitant bloom. Bright yellow crocuses set off the path. Grijpstra looked at the crocuses. He didn't seem pleased.

"Crocuses," de Gier said, "very nice. Jolly little flowers."

"No. Unimaginative plants, manufactured, not grown. Computer plants. They make the bulbs in a machine and program them to look stupid. Go ahead, Sergeant, press the bell."

"Really?" the sergeant asked.

Grijpstra's jowls sagged. "Yes. They are like mass-manufactured cheese, tasteless; cheese is probably made with the same machines."

"Cheese," de Gier said moistly, "there's nothing wrong with cheese either, apart from not having any right now. Breakfast has slipped by, you know." He glanced at his watch.

They read the nameplate while the bell rang. *H. F. Moozen, Attorney at Law.* The door opened. A man in a housecoat made out of brightly striped towel material said good morning. The detectives showed their identifications. The man nodded and stepped back. A pleasant man, still young, 30 years or a bit more. The ideal model for an ad in a ladies' magazine. A background man, showing off a modern house, or a mini-car, or expensive furniture. The sort of man ladies would like to have around. Quiet, secure, mildly good-looking. Not a passionate man, but lawyers seldom are. Lawyers practise detachment; they identify with their clients, but only up to a point.

"You won't take long, I hope," Mr. Moozen said. "I wanted to go with the ambulance, but the driver said you were on the way, and that I wouldn't be of any help if I stayed with my wife."

"Was your wife conscious when she left here, sir?"

"Barely. She couldn't speak."

"She ate an egg, a chocolate egg?"

"Yes. I don't care for chocolate myself. It was a gift, we thought,

from friends. I had to let the dog out early this morning, an hour ago, and there was an Easter bunny sitting on the path. He held an egg wrapped up in silver paper. I took him in, woke up my wife, and showed the bunny to her, and she took the egg and ate it, then became ill. I telephoned for the ambulance and they came almost immediately. I would like to go to the hospital now."

"Come in our car, sir. Can I see the bunny?"

Mr. Moozen took off the housecoat and put on a jacket. He opened the door leading to the kitchen and a small dog jumped around the detectives, yapping greetings. The bunny stood on the kitchen counter; it was almost a foot high. Grijpstra tapped its back with his knuckles; it sounded solid.

"Hey," de Gier said. He turned the bunny around and showed it to Grijpstra.

"Brwah!" Grijpstra said.

The rabbit's toothless mouth gaped. The beast's eyes were close together and deeply sunk into the skull. Its ears stood up aggressively. The bunny leered at them, its torso crouched; the paws that had held the deadly egg seemed ready to punch.

"It's roaring," de Gier said. "See? A roaring rabbit. Easter bunnies are supposed to smile."

"Shall we go?" Mr. Moozen asked.

They used the siren and the trip to the hospital didn't take ten minutes. The city was still quiet. But there proved to be no hurry. An energetic bright young nurse led them to a waiting room. Mrs. Moozen was being worked on; her condition was still critical. The nurse would let them know if there was any change.

"Can we smoke?" Grijpstra asked.

"If you must." The nurse smiled coldly, appraised de Gier's tall wide-shouldered body with a possessive feminist glance, swung her hips, and turned to the door.

"Any coffee?"

"There's a machine in the hall. Don't smoke in the hall, please."

There were several posters in the waiting room. A picture of a cigarette pointing to a skull with crossed bones. A picture of a happy child biting into an apple. A picture of a drunken driver (bubbles surrounding his head proved he was drunk) followed by an ambulance. The caption read: "Not *if* you have an accident, but *when* you have an accident."

De Gier fetched coffee and Grijpstra offered cigars. Mr. Moozen said he didn't smoke.

"Well," Grijpstra said patiently and puffed out a ragged dark cloud, "now who would want to poison your wife, sir? Has there been any recent trouble in her life?"

The question hung in the small white room while Moozen thought. The detectives waited. De Gier stared at the floor, Grijpstra observed the ceiling. A full minute passed.

"Yes," Mr. Moozen said, "some trouble. With me. We contemplated a divorce."

"I see."

"But then we decided to stay together. The trouble passed."

"Any particular reason why you considered a divorce, sir?"

"My wife had a lover." Mr. Moozen's words were clipped and precise.

"*Had,"* de Gier said. "The affair came to an end?"

"Yes. We had some problems with our central heating, something the mechanics couldn't fix. An engineer came out and my wife fell in love with him. She told me — she doesn't like to be secretive. They met each other in motels for a while."

"You were upset?"

"Yes. It was a serious affair. The engineer's wife is a mental patient; he divorced her and was awarded custody of his two children. I thought he was looking for a new wife. My wife has no children of her own — we have been married some six years and would like to have children. My wife and the engineer seemed well matched. I waited a month and then told her to make up her mind — either him or me, not both, I couldn't stand it."

"And she chose you?"

"Yes."

"Do you know the engineer?"

A vague pained smile floated briefly on Moozen's face. "Not personally. We did meet once and discussed central heating systems. Any further contact with him was through my wife."

"And when did all this happen, sir?"

"Recently. She only made her decision a week ago. I don't think she has met him since. She told me it was all over."

"His name and address, please, sir."

De Gier closed his notebook and got up. "Shall we go, Adjutant?"

Grijpstra sighed and got up too. They shook hands with Moozen and wished him luck. Grijpstra stopped at the desk. The nurse wasn't helpful, but Grijpstra insisted and de Gier smiled and eventually they were taken to a doctor who accompanied them to the next floor. Mrs. Moozen seemed comfortable. Her arms were stretched out on the blanket. The face was calm. The detectives were led out of the room again.

"Bad," the doctor said, "parathion is a strong poison. Her stomach is ripped to shreds. We'll have to operate and remove part of it, but I think she will live. The silly woman ate the whole egg, a normal-sized

egg. Perhaps she was still too sleepy to notice the taste."

"Her husband is downstairs. Perhaps you should call him up, especially if you think she will live." Grijpstra sounded concerned. He probably was, de Gier thought. He felt concerned himself. The woman was beautiful, with a finely curved nose, very thin in the bridge, and large eyes and a soft and sensitive mouth. He looked at her long delicate hands.

"Husbands," the doctor said. "Prime suspects in my experience. Husbands are supposed to love their wives, but usually they don't. It's the same the other way round. Marriage seems to breed violence — it's one of the impossible situations we humans have to put up with."

Grijpstra's pale blue eyes twinkled. "Are you married, Doctor?"

The doctor grinned back. "Very. Oh, yes."

"A long time?"

"Long enough."

Grijpstra's grin faded. "So am I. Too long. But poison is nasty. Thank you, Doctor."

There wasn't much conversation in the car when they drove to the engineer's address. The city's streets had filled up. People were stirring about on the sidewalks and cars crowded each other, honking occasionally. The engineer lived in a block of apartments, and Grijpstra switched off the engine and lit another small black cigar.

"A family drama. What do you think, Sergeant?"

"I don't think. But that rabbit was most extraordinary. Not bought in a shop. A specially made rabbit, and well made, not by an amateur."

"Are we looking for a sculptor? Some arty person? Would Mr. Moozen or the engineer be an artist in his spare time? How does one make a chocolate rabbit, anyway?"

De Gier tried to stretch, but didn't succeed in his cramped quarters. He yawned instead. "You make a mold, I suppose, out of plaster of Paris or something, and then you pour hot chocolate into the mold and wait for it to harden. That rabbit was solid chocolate, several kilos of it. Our artistic friend went to a lot of trouble."

"A baker? A pastry man?"

"Or an engineer — engineers design forms sometimes, I believe. Let's meet this lover man."

The engineer was a small nimble man with a shock of black hair and dark lively eyes, a nervous man, nervous in a pleasant childlike manner. De Gier remembered that Mrs. Moozen was a small woman too. They were ushered into a four-room apartment. They had to be careful not to step on a large number of toys, spread about evenly. Two little boys played on the floor; the eldest ran out of the room to fetch his Easter present to show it to the uncles. It was a basketful of

eggs, homemade, out of chocolate. The other boy came to show his basket, identical but a size smaller.

"My sister and I made them last night," the engineer said. "She came to live here after my wife left and she looks after the kids, but she is spending the Easter weekend with my parents in the country. We couldn't go because Tom here had measles, hadn't you, Tom?"

"Yes," Tom said. "Big measles. Little Klaas here hasn't had them yet."

Klaas looked sorry. Grijpstra took a plastic truck off a chair and sat down heavily after having looked at the engineer who waved him on. "Please, make yourself at home." De Gier had found himself a chair too and was rolling a cigarette. The engineer provided coffee and shooed the children into another room.

"Any trouble?"

"Yes," Grijpstra said. "I am afraid we usually bring trouble. A Mrs. Moozen has been taken to hospital. An attempt was made on her life. I believe you are acquainted with Mrs. Moozen?"

"Ann," the engineer said. "My God! Is she all right?"

De Gier had stopped rolling his cigarette. He was watching the man carefully; his large brown eyes gleamed, but not with pleasure or anticipation. The sergeant felt sorrow, a feeling that often accompanied his intrusions into the private lives of his fellow citizens. He shifted and the automatic pistol in his shoulder holster nuzzled into his armpit. He impatiently pushed the weapon back. This was no time to be reminded that he carried death with him, legal death.

"What happened?" the engineer was asking. "Did anybody hurt her?"

"A question," Grijpstra said gently. "A question first, sir. You said your sister and you were making chocolate Easter eggs last night. Did you happen to make any bunnies too?"

The engineer sucked noisily on his cigarette. Grijpstra repeated his question.

"Bunnies? Yes, or no. We tried, but it was too much for us. The eggs were easy — my sister is good at that. We have a pudding form for a bunny, but all we could manage was a pudding. It is still in the kitchen, a surprise for the kids later on today. Chocolate pudding — they like it."

"Can we see the kitchen, please?"

The engineer didn't get up. "My God," he said again, "so she was poisoned, was she? How horrible! Where is she now?"

"In the hospital, sir."

"Bad?"

Grijpstra nodded. "The doctor said she will live. Some sort of pesticide was mixed into chocolate, which she ate."

The engineer got up; he seemed dazed. They found the kitchen. Leftover chocolate mix was still on the counter. Grijpstra brought out an envelope and scooped some of the hardened chips into it.

"Do you know that Ann and I had an affair?"

"Yes, sir."

"Were you told that she finished the affair, that she decided to stay with her husband?"

"Yes, sir."

The engineer was tidying up the counter mechanically. "I see. So I could be a suspect. Tried to get at her out of spite or something. But I am not a spiteful man. You wouldn't know that. I don't mind being a suspect, but I would like to see Ann. She is in the hospital, you said. What hospital?"

"The Wilhelmina, sir."

"Can't leave the kids here, can I? Maybe the neighbors will take them for an hour or so... yes. I'll go and see Ann. This is terrible."

Grijpstra marched to the front door with de Gier trailing behind him. "Don't move from the house today if you please, sir, not until we telephone or come again. We'll try and be as quick as we can."

"Nice chap," de Gier said when the car found its parking place in the vast courtyard of headquarters. "That engineer, I mean. I rather liked Mr. Moozen too, and Mrs. Moozen is a lovely lady. Now what?"

"Go back to the Moozen house, Sergeant, and get a sample of the roaring bunny. Bring it to the laboratory together with this envelope. If they check we have a heavy point against the engineer."

De Gier restarted the engine. "Maybe he is not so nice, eh? He could have driven his wife crazy and now he tries to murder his girlfriend, his ex-girlfriend. Lovely Ann Moozen who dared to stand him up. Could be, do you think so?"

Grijpstra leaned his bulk against the car and addressed his words to the emptiness of the yard. "No. But that could be the obvious solution. He was distressed, genuinely distressed, I would say. If he hadn't been and if he hadn't had those kids in the house, I might have brought him in for further questioning."

"And Mr. Moozen?"

"Could be. Maybe he didn't find the bunny on the garden path; maybe he put it there, or maybe he had it ready in the cupboard and brought it to his wandering wife. He is a lawyer — lawyers can be devious at times. True?"

De Gier said, "Yes, yes, yes..." and kept on saying so until Grijpstra squeezed the elbow sticking out of the car's window. "You are saying *yes*, but you don't sound convinced."

"I thought Moozen was suffering too."

"Murderers usually suffer, don't they?"

De Gier started his “Yes, yes,” and Grijpstra marched off.

They met an hour later, in the canteen in headquarters. They munched rolls stuffed with sliced liver and roast beef and muttered diligently at each other.

“So it is the same chocolate?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean much. One of the lab’s assistants has a father who owns a pastry shop. He said that there are only three mixes on the market and our stuff is the most popular make. No, not much of a clue there.”

“So?”

“We may have a full case on our hands. We should go back to Mr. Moozen, I think, and find out about friends and relatives. Perhaps his wife had other lovers, or jealous lady friends.”

“Why her?”

Grijpstra munched on. “Hmm?”

“Why *her?”* de Gier repeated. “Why not him?”

Grijpstra swallowed. “Him? What about him?”

De Gier reached for the plate, but Grijpstra restrained the sergeant’s hand. “Wait, you are hard to understand when you have your mouth full. What about him?”

De Gier looked at the roll. Grijpstra picked it up and ate it.

“Him,” de Gier said unhappily. “He found the bunny on the garden path, the ferocious bunny holding the pernicious egg. A gift, how nice. But he doesn’t eat chocolate, so he runs inside and shows the gift to his wife and his wife grabs the egg and eats it. She may have thought *he* was giving it to her, she was still half asleep. Maybe she noticed the taste, but she ate on to please her husband. She became ill at once and he telephoned for an ambulance. Now, if he had wanted to kill her he might have waited an hour or so, to give the poison a chance to do its job. But he grabbed his phone, fortunately. What I am trying to say is, the egg may have been intended for him, from an enemy who didn’t even know Moozen had a wife, who didn’t care about killing the wife.”

“Ah,” Grijpstra said, and swallowed the last of the roll. “Could be. We’ll ask Mr. Moozen about his enemies. But not just now. There is the dead man we found in the park — a message came in while you were away. A missing person has been reported and the description fits our corpse. According to the radio room a woman phoned to say that a man who is renting a room in her house has been behaving strangely lately and has now disappeared. She traced him to the corner bar where he spent last evening, until two A.M. when they closed.

“He was a little drunk according to the barkeeper, but not blind drunk. She always takes him tea in the morning, but this morning he

wasn't there and the bed was still made. But she does think he's been home, for she heard the front door at a little after two A.M., opening and closing twice. He probably fetched the rope and his campstool then."

"And the man was fairly old and has a short gray beard?"

"Right."

"So we go and see the landlady. I'll get a photograph — they took dozens this morning and they should be developed by now. Was anything found in his clothes?"

"Nothing." Grijpstra looked guiltily at the empty plate. "Want another roll?"

"You ate it."

"That's true, and the canteen is out of rolls; we got the last batch. Never mind, Sergeant. Let's go out and do some work. Work will take your mind off food."

"That's him," the landlady with the plastic curlers said. Her glasses had slipped to the tip of her blunt nose while she studied the photograph. "Oh, how horrible! His tongue is sticking out. Poor Mr. Marchant, is he dead?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"For shame, and such a nice gentleman. He has been staying here for nearly five years now and he was always so polite."

Grijpstra tried to look away from the glaring pink curlers, pointing at his forehead from the woman's thinning hair.

"Did he have any troubles, ma'am? Anything that may have led him to take his own life?"

The curlers bobbed frantically. "Yes. Money troubles. Nothing to pay the taxman with. He always paid the rent, but he hadn't been paying his taxes. And his business wasn't doing well. He has a shop in the next street; he makes things — ornaments he calls them, out of brass. But there was some trouble with the neighbors. Too much noise, and something about the zoning too; this is a residential area now, they say. The neighbors wanted him to move, but he had nowhere to move to, and he was getting nasty letters, lawyers' letters. He would have had to close down, and he had to make money to pay the taxman. It was driving him crazy. I could hear him walk around in his room at night, round and round until I had to switch off my hearing aid."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"He was alone," the woman said and shuffled with them to the door. "All alone, like me. And he was always so nice." She was crying.

"Happy Easter," de Gier said, and opened the Volkswagen's door for the adjutant.

"The same to you. Back to Mr. Moozen again — we *are* driving

about this morning. I could use some coffee again. Maybe Mr. Moozen will oblige."

"He won't be so happy either. We aren't making anybody happy today," the sergeant said and tried to put the Volkswagen into first gear. The gear slipped and the car took off in second.

They found Mr. Moozen in his garden. It had begun to rain again, but the lawyer didn't seem to notice that he was getting wet. He was staring at the bright yellow crocuses, touching them with his foot. He had trampled a few of them into the grass.

"How is your wife, sir?"

"Conscious and in pain. The doctors think they can save her, but she will have to be on a stringent diet for years and she'll be very weak for months. I won't have her back for a while."

Grijpstra coughed. "We visited your wife's, ah, previous lover, sir." The word "previous" came out awkwardly and he coughed again to take away the bad taste.

"Did you arrest him?"

"No, sir."

"Any strong reasons to suspect the man?"

"Are you a criminal lawyer, sir?"

Moozen kicked the last surviving crocus, turned on his heels, and led his visitors into the house. "No, I specialize in civil cases. Sometimes I do divorces, but I don't have enough experience to point a finger in this personal case. Divorce is a messy business, but with a little tact and patience reason usually prevails. To try and poison somebody is unreasonable behavior. I can't visualize Ann provoking that type of action — she is a gentle woman, sensuous but gentle. If she did break her relationship with the engineer she would have done it diplomatically."

"He seemed upset, sir, genuinely upset."

"Quite. I had hoped as much. So where are we now?"

"With you, sir. Do *you* have any enemies? Anybody who hated you so badly that he wanted you to die a grotesque death, handed to you by a roaring rabbit? You did find the rabbit on the garden path this morning, didn't you, sir?"

Moozen pointed. "Yes, out there, sitting in between the crocuses, leering, and as you say, roaring. Giving me the egg."

"Now, which demented mind might have thought of shaping that apparition, sir? Are you dealing with any particularly unpleasant cases at this moment? Any cases that have a badly twisted undercurrent? Is anyone blaming you for something bad that is happening to them?"

Moozen brushed his hair with both hands. "No. I am working on a bad case having to do with a truckdriver who got involved in a complicated accident; his truck caught fire and it was loaded with

expensive cargo. Both his legs were crushed. His firm is suing the firm that owned the other truck. A lot of money in claims is involved and the parties are becoming impatient, with me mostly. The case is dragging on and on. But if they kill me the case will become even more complicated, with no hope of settlement in sight."

"Anything else, sir?"

"The usual. I collect bad debts, so sometimes I have to get nasty. I write threatening letters, sometimes I telephone people or even visit them. I act tough — it's got to be done in my profession. Usually they pay but they don't like me for bothering them."

"Any pastry shops?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Pastry shops," Grijpstra said, "people who make and sell confectionery. That rabbit was a work of art in a way, made by a professional. Are you suing anybody who would have the ability to create the roaring rabbit?"

"*Ornaments!*" de Gier shouted. His shout tore at the quiet room. Moozen and Grijpstra looked up, startled.

"Ornaments! Brass ornaments. Ornaments are made from molds. We've got to check his shop."

"Whose shop?" Grijpstra frowned irritably. "Keep your voice down, Sergeant. What shop? What ornaments?"

"Marchant!" de Gier shouted. "Marchant's shop."

"Marchant?" Moozen was shouting too. "Where did you get that name? *Emil* Marchant?"

Grijpstra's cigar fell on the carpet. He tried to pick it up and it burned his hand, sparks finding their way into the carpet's strands. He stamped them out roughly.

"You know a Mr. Marchant, sir?" de Gier asked quietly.

"No, I haven't met him. But I have written several letters to a man named Emil Marchant. On behalf of clients who are hindered by the noise he makes in his shop. He works with brass, and it isn't only the noise but there seems to be a stink as well. My clients want him to move out and are prepared to take him to court if necessary. Mr. Marchant telephoned me a few times, pleading for mercy. He said he owed money to the tax department and wanted time to make the money, that he would move out later; but my clients have lost patience. I didn't give in to him — in fact, I just pushed harder. He will have to go to court next week and he is sure to lose out."

"Do you know what line of business he is in, sir?"

"Doorknobs, I believe, and knockers for doors, in the shape of lions' heads — that sort of thing. And weathervanes. He told me on the phone. All handmade. He is a craftsman."

Grijpstra got up. "We'll be on our way, sir. We found Mr.

Marchant this morning, dead, hanging from a tree in the Amsterdam Forest. He probably hanged himself around seven A.M., and at some time before he must have delivered the rabbit and its egg. According to his landlady he has been behaving strangely lately. He must have blamed you for his troubles and tried to take his revenge. He didn't mean to kill your wife, he meant to kill you. He didn't know that you don't eat chocolate and he probably didn't even know you were married. We'll check further and make a report. The rabbit's mold is probably still in his shop, and if not we'll find traces of the chocolate. We'll have the rabbit checked for fingerprints. It won't be difficult to come up with irrefutable proof. If we do, we'll let you know, sir, a little later today. I am very sorry all this has happened."

"Nothing ever happens in Amsterdam," de Gier said as he yanked the door of the Volkswagen open, "and when it does it all fits in immediately."

But Grijpstra didn't agree.

"We would never have solved the case, or rather *I* wouldn't have if you hadn't thought of the rabbit as an ornament."

"No, Grijpstra, we would have found Marchant's name in Moozen's files."

The adjutant shook his heavy grizzled head. "No, we wouldn't have checked the files. If he had kept on saying that he wasn't working on any bad cases I wouldn't have pursued that line of thought. I'd have reverted to trying to find an enemy of his wife. We might have worked for weeks and called in all sorts of help and wasted everybody's time. You are clever, Sergeant."

De Gier was studying a redheaded girl waiting for a streetcar.

"Am I?"

"Yes. But not as clever as I am," Grijpstra said and grinned. "You work for me. I personally selected you as my assistant. You are a tool in my expert hands."

De Gier winked at the redheaded girl and the girl smiled back. The traffic had jammed up ahead and the car was blocked. De Gier opened his door.

"Hey! Where are you going?"

"It's a holiday, Adjutant, and you can drive this wreck for a change. I am going home. That girl is waiting for a streetcar that goes to my side of the city. Maybe she hasn't had lunch yet. I am going to invite her to go to a Chinese restaurant."

"But we have reports to make, and we've got to check out Marchant's shop; it'll be locked, we have to find the key in his room, and we have to telephone the engineer to let him off the hook."

"I am taking the streetcar," de Gier said. "You do all that. You ate my roll."

Charlie's Dodge
by *Brian Garfield* [2]

A new Charlie story by Brian Garfield

Charlie rides again! — the overweight, overage, but never over-eager counterespionage agent is assigned another tough and ticklish problem — and expected to work another miracle...

❖

Streaks of falling gray rain slanted across the silhouette of Sydney Harbour Bridge and when the taxi decanted me under the shelter of the porte-cochere canopy my poplin suit was still steamy from the dash at the airport. I carried my traveling bag inside the high-rise, found my way to the elevators, and rode one up to the ninth floor.

The door had frosted glass and a legend: *Australamerica Travel & Shipping Agency Ltd — New York, Los Angeles, Sydney.*

The girl at the reception desk sent me down a sterile hall. I could hear typewriters and Telexes in the warren of partitioned cubicles.

The conference room had wrap-around plate glass; it was a corner suite. The view of the stormy city was striking.

Two men awaited me. The ashtray was a litter of butts and the styrofoam coffee cups had nothing left in them but smeared brown stains. Young Leonard Myers hurried like an officious bellboy to relieve me of the B-4 bag. "I hope you've got a spare suit in here. You're drenched. How was the flight? Bill, I guess you know Charlie Dark?"

"Only by reputation." The tall man came to shake my hand. "Good to meet you, Charlie. I'm Bill Jaeger, chief of station down here."

When the amenities were out of the way and we'd sent out for sandwiches I settled my amplitude into a wooden armchair at the table. It was a bit of a squeeze. "Now, what's the flap?"

Myers said, "Didn't Rice brief you?"

"No."

"That figures," Jaeger said. "I may be stepping out of line but it baffles me how Rice keeps his job."

I let it lie. It wouldn't have been useful to explain to Jaeger that Rice keeps his job only because of me. Either Jaeger would refuse to

believe it or he'd resent my conceit.

"The flap," Myers said, "goes by the names of Beth Hilley and Iwan Stenback. They purport to be journalists."

Jaeger made a face. "Underground press. They're tearing our station to pieces."

"Systematically," Myers said. "Causing a great deal of embarrassment for both the Australians and us." Then a wan smile. "You and I were sent in to get rid of them for Bill. Actually that's not quite accurate. You were sent to get rid of them. I was sent to hold your coat." With his collegiate good looks Myers was the picture of earnest innocence but I'd known him a while — sometimes he was astonishingly naive but he was brighter than he seemed: a quick study. One day he'd be in charge of a department.

A girl brought us a tray of sandwiches and rattled something at Jaeger in 'Stryne — I didn't get but one word in four; the accent was more impenetrable than Cockney. Jaeger said, "I'll have to call them back later." The girl smiled, nodded, and departed, legs swishing; Myers' eyes followed her until she was gone.

Jaeger was one of those lanky Gary Cooperish people who seem to have flexible bones rather than joints. I knew him as he knew me: by reputation. Easygoing but efficient — a good station chief, reliable, but not the sort you'd want running a vital station in a danger zone. He was a good diplomat and knew how to avoid ruffling feathers; he was the kind of executive you assigned to a friendly country rather than a potential enemy.

He said, "Iwan Stenback publishes a weekly rag called *Sydney Exposed.* Part soft-core porn, part yellow gossip and cheap scandal, part health food recipes and diagrams for Yoga positions, part radical-left editorializing. Until recently it didn't have much of a circulation — mostly just freaks. Very youth-oriented. Always just skirting the libel and obscenity laws. Then a couple of months ago Stenback hired a hot new reporter by the name of Beth Hilley. Since then the circulation's shot up like a Titan missile because the rag announced in a page-one box under Hilley's byline that they were going to start naming and identifying American C.I.A. spies who were working undercover in Australia."

Myers said, "It's happened before, of course. In Greece that time, and—"

I cut him off. "Have they made good on the threat?"

Jaeger said in his dry way, "So far they've named seven of our people."

"Accurately?"

"Yes."

I decided I liked him. He didn't make apologies; he didn't waffle.

He looked like a cowboy and talked with a prairie twang, but I suspected there was nothing wrong with his brain.

I said, “Where’d they get the names?”

“We think one or two of our people may have been indiscreet. They aren’t all paragons, the people we buy information from. And in a country like this they’re not scared into secrecy — they don’t need to worry about jackboots in the hall at midnight. In some ways it’s harder to run a secure intelligence network in a free country than it is in a dictatorship.”

“You’ve made efforts to plug the leaks?”

“Yes, sure. I think I know how it may have happened. I’m told Beth Hilley’s attractive — seductive as hell.”

“You’ve never seen her?”

“No. Not many people have, evidently. I’m sure she goes under a variety of cover identities. After all, if her face were known, people wouldn’t talk to her.”

“Is ‘Beth Hilley’ a pen-name?”

“No.” Jaeger deferred to Myers.

“Born in Australia but schooled in England and Switzerland.” Myers was reading from his notebook. “Beth Hilley’s her real name. She’s twenty-seven. The Berne file suggests she may have had contact with members of the Baader-Meinhof gang. In any case she returned to Australia a year ago with a head full of radical revolutionary anti-capitalist theory.”

Jaeger said, “Typical immature anti-establishment Anti-American notions. Australia already has a socialist government but that doesn’t seem to satisfy these idiots. They want blood. Preferably blue. It doesn’t seem to penetrate their thick heads that this capitalist free-enterprise system they hate so much has graduated more people out of poverty than any other system in history.”

“Still,” I said, wanting to get him off his political stump, “for an idiot she seems to have done a capable professional espionage job against us.”

“Every week,” Myers said, “the name of another of our agents appears in *Sydney Exposed.* They promise to keep doing it until they’ve named every last American spy in Australia, New Zealand, and New Guinea.”

“Can they make good on the threat?”

Jaeger smiled. “We don’t know. But they’ve done it so far.”

Myers said, “We’re working with the Australians on this — they don’t like it any better than we do. It embarrasses them as much as it does us. After all, the Australian government knows we’re here. But they can’t be seen to infringe the freedom of the press, and obviously Washington can’t be seen to bully the press of an independent nation.

It's got to be handled in such a way that it doesn't look like official repression. That's why you're here, Charlie. To think of something clever."

"At least Rice hasn't lost faith in my ability to work miracles," I remarked. I brooded at Myers, then at Jaeger. They seemed to be waiting for me to provide an instantaneous solution to their difficulty. "My problem," I confessed, "is a deep-down fanaticism in behalf of absolute freedom of the press. Wherever censorship begins, that's where tyranny begins."

"I agree," said Jaeger, "but the Australian press tends to be a bit lurid anyway, and this particular rag goes far beyond the limits of responsible journalism."

That was putting it diplomatically. The real issue was the fact that *Sydney Exposed* was blowing the covers off our agents. When you expose an agent you render him inoperable. The newspaper was systematically closing down our network. Given the premise that the survival of nations depends on the accuracy of their intelligence, we had no choice but to stop publication of these revelations. Yet I could not bring myself to think in terms of strong-arm methods. There has to be a difference between the good guys and the bad guys.

I said, "Has anyone tried to reason with them?"

Jaeger said, "I had a talk with Stenback. He listened politely, then laughed in my face."

"Tell me about him."

"Sort of a guru type. Brown scraggly beard shot with gray. Wears his hair in a ponytail. Myers has the official details."

Myers turned a page in his notebook. "Thirty-four years old. Born in Sweden. Was a lieutenant in the Swedish army — a crack shot, by the way. Emigrated here five years ago. Naturalized Australian citizen. Background reports indicate he used to hang out with American Vietnam draft dodgers in Sweden. Earlier his father was a quisling in Norway during the War, which may explain why Stenback grew up with a chip on his shoulder. Before he came down here he worked a while as a legman on a few of the cheap London tabloids, publishing cheap filthy innuendoes about prominent Members of Parliament and the like. Digging up dirt seems to be his mission in life — the worse it smells the better he likes it." Myers closed the notebook. "Rice would prefer it if you arranged a fatal accident for them, Charlie."

"I don't much care what he prefers. I don't kill people, it's not my style. Any fool can kill people."

"Maybe this time you haven't got a choice. How else can you stop them publishing this stuff?"

We sat in a four-door Humber across the street from the shop-

front office of *Sydney Exposed.* It was a shabby old part of the city — cheap flats, a boarded-up cinema, rubbish in the gutters. In the newspaper's windows the lights burned late — tomorrow was this week's publication day and Stenback was in there with his staff composing the late pages. "She never comes to the office personally?"

"Apparently not," Myers said. "We've had it staked out for ten days. If she's set foot in the place we're not aware of it. Of course we're not sure what she looks like. The last available photograph is from nine years ago when she was eighteen. Blonde hair, gorgeous face and figure — the beach-beauty type. You know these athletic Australian girls. But who knows. Maybe she's gained weight, changed her hair, whatever. She could be any one of a dozen women who've wandered in and out of there."

I said, "Assuming she doesn't report in person to the office, it follows she must send her copy in. Not by the post; I think she'd be too paranoid to entrust her copy to government mails. Her articles would be hand-delivered."

Myers began to smile. "Then—"

"It'll take man-hours and legwork but let's try to put surveillance on anyone who brings an envelope to this office..."

Through the wrap-around corner windows the sky was cheerful but Jaeger was glum. "Our security's all right — I'm pretty sure we've plugged all possible leaks. But it's a case of locking the barn door after the horse thieves have made their getaway. Probably they've got all the names already — they're publishing one a week, holding back to keep the circulation up. It's like a week-to-week cliffhanger serial. Every week the public clamor grows — they're starting to call for blood in Adelaide and Melbourne. Our blood. If it keeps up we'll all find ourselves deported. It'll be done with man-to-man shrugs and smiles and abject apologies but they'll do it all the same — they'll have no option if the public pressure grows bad enough. You'll have to move fast, Charlie."

"I'm ready to," I said. "We've found Beth Hilley."

She was clever but all the same she was an amateur and it hadn't occurred to her that a cut-out and blind-drop setup can be breached. For a week we had backtracked all the messengers who had delivered envelopes to *Sydney Exposed.* We doubted she would use a formal messenger service; we were right.

The drop was mundane but adequate: a luggage locker in a railway station. But the thing about lockers is that you have to transfer the locker key. Once we knew the system we broke it easily. Hilley would leave the envelope in the station locker and put the key in another envelope and leave that with the landlord of a pub she

frequented near the waterfront. The kid — a bearded long-haired boy in frayed denims and a patchwork jacket — would collect the key from the bar, go to the locker, get the envelope, and carry it by hand to *Sydney Exposed*. The kid, like five others who made deliveries regularly to the newspaper, was shadowed for a week and when he picked up the key and opened the locker we knew we were onto Beth Hilley: we simply staked out the lockers until she arrived to deposit the next week's copy.

She lived in a small flat on a suburban street near a shopping center. As it turned out she hadn't resorted to any disguise. She was still blonde and gorgeous with a leggy showgirl look. Three nights in a row she emerged in evening dress, drove her white MG into the heart of Sydney, and rendezvoused with a man: each night a different man, each night a different posh waterhole. Each night she and the man — two politicians, one diplomat — would go to a luxury hotel afterward.

Myers laughed. "So that's how she meets so many prominent guys. She's a call girl!"

We requisitioned revolvers and special-effects equipment from Jaeger's station. We were leaving when Jaeger met us in the corridor. He glanced at the revolvers as we fed them into our attaché cases. "Then you're going to kill them after all."

I shrugged.

"You want any help? I can give you a back-up squad."

"Let's keep it quiet," I replied.

Myers said cheerily, "We'll handle it, Bill."

Jaeger was still dubious when we left.

When she answered the door I pushed the gun up under her nose and she backed away in alarm. I stepped inside and closed the door. "Stay loose, birdie. No screams, all right?"

A veil slid across her eyes. "What do you want?"

"Sit down and don't talk. We're waiting for somebody."

"Who are you?"

"Does it matter?"

"You're an American."

"Really? I thought I was doing a fair 'Stryne accent there."

She managed a snort of contemptuous laughter. She wore a white jumpsuit with a yellow scarf at the neck — crisp, very smart. She had a tan complexion as soft and smooth as Japanese silk; she'd have inspired desire even in a jaded centerfold photographer. I had no trouble with the notion that she would be able to extract information from men.

"Come on," she said impatiently, "what *is* this?"

"Sit down." I wiggled the gun. "It's only a .32 but they're

hollowpoint bullets — they make a terrible mess of flesh and bone." Making a face she took a seat on the divan and tucked her long legs under her. I crossed the room to close the drapes. It was a comfortable efficiency flat, not terribly big, the furniture a bit Bohemian: an old door on bricks served as a coffee table and the divan was one of those pull-out convertible beds. Apparently she spent most of her money on clothes.

"I suppose if I sit here long enough you'll tell me what this is all about?"

"Count on it, Beth."

"You're the C.I.A., aren't you? Which one? Cole? Ludlow? Fortescue?"

"What's in a name?" I sat down and rested the revolver on my knee. "Be patient, Beth."

With enviable aplomb she rested her head against the wall and closed her eyes, feigning boredom. A very tough young lady. I hoped we could crack her. It wouldn't be easy.

Myers brought Iwan Stenback into the flat at gunpoint. The Swede was a short man with a beard and long hair tied back with a rubber band. His pale eyes took in the scene quickly. "So. The C.I.A. brings us together to murder us. I suppose you'll give it the appearance of a lovers' quarrel. Do you honestly think anyone will believe such a crude sham?"

"We like to think we're a bit more sophisticated than that," I said. "Sit down, Stenback."

He moved to stand beside Beth Hilley. She touched his hand possessively and not without fear. I flicked the gun in his direction and he eased past the arm of the couch and sat down next to Beth Hilley. He wasn't a bad-looking man. There was a jaded professorial cynicism about him — the kind of *weltschmertz* that sometimes appeals to women: they see immediately through the bitter veneer and convince themselves that beneath it is a sensitive being who needs coddling and protecting.

I said, "We need to have a little talk."

Myers snarled. "What do you want to talk for? Let's get it over with." He cocked his revolver. It made a nasty sound in the room.

"Patience," I told him. To Stenback I said, "My associate favors brute force but I suspect we'd all prefer to avoid that."

It was the old two-cop dodge: the good cop offers you a cigarette, the bad cop slaps it out of your mouth. After a while you begin to look on the good cop not as your jailer but as your friend.

I sat down facing them and placed my revolver on the tabletop in front of me to free my hands so that I could take out my wallet and

flash it at them. “My name is Charles Dark. Security officer with the United States Government.”

I heard Myers’ melodramatic sigh of exasperation.

Stenback wasn’t falling for it. “You’ve got no jurisdiction here,” he said coolly.

Beth Hilley leaned forward to read my ID laminate. “Charles Dark. A new name for our list, Iwan.” She favored me with an icy smile.

I returned it in kind. “Now that you’ve demonstrated your fearlessness shall we get down to business?”

Stenback yawned. “What business?”

“You’re an entrepreneur,” I said. “You publish at a profit. Suppose we sweeten it?”

They looked at each other with cynical amusement. It was clear there was an attachment between them — a strong bond.

I said, “For every week’s issue in which you refrain from publishing the name of an American agent, a payment of ten thousand dollars.”

“Australian dollars?”

“American if you prefer.”

The woman laughed. “They think they can buy anyone off. Isn’t it just like them?”

I said, “How about it, Stenback?”

“I’m glad to know how much Judas money you’re willing to offer me. Of course my answer is no. Did you think I’d be that easy to bribe? I can’t compromise the people’s right to know.”

“Good for you,” Myers said. “That’s all we wanted to know, ain’t it, Charlie? Let’s get it done.”

Beth Hilley reached for Stenback’s hand.

Myers spoke again, the snarl increasing. “I told you it would be a waste of time, Charlie.”

“In conscience,” I said wearily, “we had to offer them the option.” I stood up and went over to the side of the room to get out of the line of fire; I put my back to the wall and shoved my hands in my pockets. “You can change your minds, of course. My associate — well, I’m afraid he enjoys rough and tumble. Regrettable but there you are. We’re forced by people like you to employ people like him. Actually I detest the young oaf. I’d hoped to one-up him by denying him his pleasure.”

Myers turned angrily toward me. His revolver rode around in my direction. “You fat old buzzard. I’ve had all I can take of your sanctimonious—”

It was the distraction Stenback must have been praying for. He pounced on the .32 revolver that I had left lying on the table; in an

instant it was in his fist and roaring.

In that confined space the blasts were earsplitting. My jaw went agape. Deafened, I saw Myers spin wildly around and slam against the wall. The gun dropped from his fingers. He clutched at the wall and slid down, leaving a wet red smear on the plaster. His shoes drummed the floor and reflex made him curl up; then he went still.

My hand belatedly whipped out of my pocket with the flat automatic pistol I'd concealed there. I leveled it at Stenback's profile. "Drop it. Now!"

He hesitated. His revolver was still aimed at Myers, who lay in an untidy heap. The woman sat wide-eyed, motionless.

I spoke quickly. "I won't kill you unless you force me to defend myself."

It wasn't so much that he believed me; it was that I had the drop on him. By the time he could turn his gun through the ninety-degree arc toward me I could put two or three bullets into him. He'd been a soldier; he knew that.

Slowly he lowered his arm to his side and let the revolver drop to the carpet.

"Smart," I observed. "Kick it to me. Gently."

When he complied I got down on one knee and picked up the .32 by inserting my ballpoint pen into its muzzle. When I stood up I flapped the automatic toward him. "Sit down, sit back, relax."

He sank onto the divan and leaned back warily. I dropped the .32 into my jacket pocket and sidled around toward Myers, keeping my automatic trained on Stenback and Beth Hilley; knelt by Myers and laid my fingers along his throat to test for a pulse. There was a good deal of blood. I removed my hand and stood, grunting with the effort. "He's dead."

"Self-defense," Stenback snapped.

"Sure." I gave him a crooked smile. "Who's going to believe that?"

I saw realization grenade into Beth Hilley. She clutched his arm in fear.

I looked down at Myers. "Everybody knows you two had it in for the C.I.A. Now you've murdered a C.I.A. agent. Man, you'll be a hundred and five before they let out out into the light of day again. Both of you," I added, looking up sharply at the woman. "It's felony murder — she's as guilty as you are. And I'll testify to that." Then I gave it a slow chilly smile. "Come to think of it you've done me a couple of favors. I never could stand the punk. I'm glad you've taken him out — they'll never stick me with him again. And you've done my job for me. The assignment was to stop you from publishing the rest of those names. You can't publish in a prison cell."

Beth Hilley sat up straight. “But we can still talk. We can talk in court and we can talk to our lawyers and they can talk to the press. We can still make those names public. Then what happens to you, superspy? It’s a black mark on your record, isn’t it?”

I regarded her with suspicion. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe the punk had a point. Maybe I’ve got no choice.” I lifted the automatic.

“Wait.” She stared at me.

Stenback seemed mesmerized by Myers’ huddled body. Then he looked up at me, at my pistol.

Beth Hilley gripped his hand tighter. He didn’t pull away. He seemed to have shrunk; it was the woman’s strength that supported both of them.

She said, “You wanted to make a deal with us. All right, we’ll take the deal.”

“Don’t make me laugh, Beth. With the evidence I’ve got now? I’ve got Stenback’s fingerprints on the murder weapon. Not to mention my own testimony.”

“But you still can’t stop us from revealing the names of your agents. Only Iwan and I can do that.”

I contrived an indifferent expression. I picked up Myers’ unused revolver and dropped it in my pocket for safekeeping; it balanced the weight of the .32 in the other pocket. Then I went toward the phone, the guns dragging my jacket down.

She watched me pick up the receiver before she spoke. “Wait a minute.”

“For what?”

“Let us go. We’ll leave the country. You’ll never hear from us again. We’ll never publish those names.”

“How do I know that, lady?”

“If we ever reveal the names,” she said shrewdly, “you’ll find us. Nobody can hide from you people. You’ll find us and kill us, or you’ll have us extradited and brought back to Australia to stand trial for murdering that man.”

I still had the phone in my hand. The dial tone buzzed at me. “It’s not my habit to trust your kind.”

Stenback said, “She’s right, Dark.” He seemed to have found his spine. “It’s the only chance you’ve got of keeping those names secret. We’re offering you the only way out. For you and for us. You let us go — we save our lives, or at least our freedom — and you get what you want. The paper stops publication.”

I spent a while thinking about it. Finally I put the phone down on its cradle. I squinted dubiously at the two of them.

I saw the silence begin to rag their nerves. I let it grate for a bit. Then abruptly I said, “All right. Get out. I’ll give you six hours to get

out of Australia before I report his death. We'll keep the murder weapon out of it unless you double-cross me — in which case I'll manage to 'find' it damn quick. You keep that in mind."

"Yeah," she said.

"We will," he said.

"Get out fast now — before I change my mind."

They fled. They looked as if they were holding their breath. I left the door open until I heard them enter the elevator. Then I shut it and locked it, glanced down at Myers' bloody body, and went across to the window. I parted the drapes and watched Stenback and Beth Hilley emerge from the canopy below me. They got into her white MG and I watched it squeal away.

Then I let the drapes fall to. Turning around, I said, "They're gone."

Myers grunted and got to his feet.

Looking down at himself he grumbled, "Do these phony blood capsules wash out? If not I've just ruined a good suit. Good grief but I'm cramped. Couldn't you have done it faster? I think I bruised a rib when I fell. Incidentally I didn't take kindly to you calling me 'punk' and 'oaf' and all that stuff."

"Are you about out of complaints now?"

He grinned at me. He was an awful sight. "Why, Charlie, I've barely started."

"Look at it this way, Myers. You've got something to tell your grandchildren about. You've just assisted Charlie Dark in pulling a brand-new twist on the oldest con game in the world — the blank-cartridge badger game. Now doesn't that just fill your heart with pride and admiration?"

"I believe you are by all odds the most infuriatingly smug conceited arrogant fat old man I've ever met," he said, "and I thank you for the privilege of allowing me to work with you."

Only the Cardinals Always Returned by *Patricia L. Schulze* [3]

A sensitive and poignant story by a new writer (this is her third story in EQMM) who is making great strides toward fulfilling her talent...

❖

Now that I am an adult I realize that few things in my life remained constant. People disappeared and never came back. There were the two small brothers who nestled for a little while in the crib my father had built for Jeff and me and then went away, leaving only two marble lambs in the graveyard as evidence that they had ever been here. And there was the little sister who never made the trip from the hospital in town to our house on the farm. Another marble lamb.

Only the cardinals always returned. In early spring, when the snow still covered the earth, the small red birds came from their winter home in the corn crib at the end of the field to perch on the upper branches of the juniper tree at our front door. It was my mother who first showed me the cardinals in the spring when I was three or four. The red bodies flashing among the close-growing branches of juniper, bits of twig or string dangling from their beaks, were magic to the eyes of a child.

As I grew older I waited eagerly for the return of the birds, the male resplendent in his scarlet coat, his olive-gray and buff mate toiling patiently by his side. When the loose-knit nest was finally assembled, the female disappeared inside, nursing the pale blue and lavender speckled eggs, while her mate took over the task of bringing her the seeds and insects she needed to sustain life.

When the eggs hatched, the busy parents would flit about feeding their offspring and keeping a watchful eye out for any enemies that threatened their happy family. Even the nest-threatening bluejay fled in fear from the cardinals' wrath.

We would get up before dawn on the great day when the baby birds, their down partially replaced with straggly feathers, would perch trembling on the end of a branch of the juniper tree. The father would take his station on a branch of the crab apple tree by the gate and start his encouraging call, "Good-cheer-cheer-cheer. Good-cheer-cheer-cheer."

The-dove-colored mother would follow with anxious cries the

maiden flight of her offspring, and if, as so often happened, the young fledgling wearied in his flight and fell to the ground short of his destination, she would swoop down beside him and keep an anxious watch until, rested and confident, the young bird clumsily launched himself and attained the crab apple tree where his father kept watch.

The cardinals always came back. Every spring, before we were even aware that spring was coming, the cardinals were busily building their nest in the juniper tree.

They came back the spring that Mother returned empty-armed from the hospital and the promised little sister went to join my two brothers on the hill. Mother and I watched the birds' mating dance, the flight of their young, but without our old excitement or joy. As the heat of summer came on, Mother seemed to wilt, as the blossoms of the crab apple tree wilted and fell from the tree. When the tree bore its tempting inedible fruit Mother drooped further, as though reminded of her own barrenness.

Then in the fall she bought a set of encyclopedias from a young man who came to the door. She seemed to recover after that and her face took on a new glow. It was like the birth of a new year rather than the dying season of an old one. I had not realized that buying a set of encyclopedias was such a complex thing, but it seemed to involve a lot of negotiation. Every week the salesman came back to discuss some new aspect of the books he was selling.

Knowing that I would be bored by their long discussions, Mother always sent me out to play. Sometimes I went to the orchard behind the house to climb in the branches of the old trees there; sometimes I went out to the oat fields to watch my father and older brother, Jeff, busy with the threshing. More often I just sat on the front steps and watched the cardinals caring for their second family of the year and listened to the sounds coming through the open door.

Then, for the only times that fateful year, I would hear my mother's laughter, and sometimes much later, her gentle crying and the salesman's soft murmuring voice comforting her. Often they would leave the house, my mother carrying an old blanket that we used for picnics in the orchard. The salesman would raise the heavy iron door that lay at ground level over the cellar in the house yard. Then I wouldn't be able to hear their talking.

The old root cellar in the yard was used to store home-canned goods and garden produce in the time of my grandparents. My parents had installed a deep-freeze and pantry shelves in our house basement, so now the outdoor cellar stood empty except for some cans of food and water that Daddy kept there in case of a tornado. We hadn't needed to use the cellar for so many years that I had almost forgotten what it looked like inside. I do remember that it was completely

underground and you had to go down a flight of earthen stairs to get to it. It had only two doors, a heavy wooden door that sealed off the cellar itself and another door of iron that lay flat on the ground and closed off the stairs.

It was on one of the days that they had gone to the cellar that my mother disappeared. I watched them from the front steps and then after a while I went back to the orchard to play. I saw my father come back from the field and go into the house and then a little later Jeff came back and took the milk pails that had been drying in the sun and went out to the barn. I wandered down to the barn and stroked the nose of the Jersey cow that was my special favorite while Jeff did the milking. When we went up to the house it was suppertime and Mother was gone.

She didn't come home that night. The cold winter passed into spring and my father had notified the sheriff, but still there was no word about my mother or the encyclopedia salesman. That spring the cardinals came back and Daddy packed up the clothes that Mother had left behind and took them into town to the Salvation Army store.

On the day the cardinals were first trying to teach their babies to fly, Jeff went down into the old cellar to replace the water bottles for the summer storm season. I was standing at the top of the stairs when I heard him give a strangled cry. He came running up the stairs, very white in the face, and was sick all over the ground. He slammed down the iron door before he ran into the house to the phone, but just before the door shut I got a whiff of the terrible odor that had probably made Jeff so sick.

That afternoon there were people all over the place. First the state police car came with two men in it, and then more police cars. Daddy hugged me for a minute and then went away in the first car. The other policemen stayed until a red and white ambulance came. The ambulance men went down into the cellar and came back carrying two stretchers covered with blankets. Soon everyone left but the county sheriff. Then Grandma came out from town and the sheriff left too.

Grandma put her big suitcase in Mother and Daddy's room. She explained that she would stay with us until Daddy came back.

That summer the cardinals' first family flew away and they raised their second. But Daddy didn't come back. In the fall Jeff had to hire some men to help with the harvest because at 17 he couldn't handle the work alone. Daddy still hadn't come back.

Then one afternoon in November I wandered into the kitchen to see what had come in the mail and found Grandma and Jeff sitting at the table. Jeff was looking very stiff-faced, like the time he had had to bury our old collie dog when she got hit by a car, and Grandma was

crying quietly. The newspaper the mailman had brought had slipped to the floor. I just got a glimpse of the headline. “Lights Dim Briefly in State Capital.”

Grandma saw me and grabbed the paper. Jeff sat me down at the table and explained that there had been a change and Daddy wasn’t coming back any more.

That winter Grandma brought the rest of her things from town and moved in to stay. In the spring we watched the cardinals together. That fall, after the cardinals deserted the juniper tree for the corn crib, Jeff left too. He went up north to the agricultural college.

He came home at Thanksgiving and again at Christmas, but during the times in between Grandma and I were pretty much alone. I guess it was a lot of work for an old woman, even with the hired help and nice neighbors.

After Christmas vacation, when Jeff had gone back to college, Grandma started talking about moving into her house in town and renting out the farm, at least until Jeff was through college. I knew that if we left it would be forever. Jeff was transferring to the State University and planning on studying law after he graduated. When that happened he would probably sell the farm.

I wandered around the orchard and out to the barn to the cows that had become my responsibility now that Jeff was gone. I would miss all this if we moved. But most of all I would miss the cardinals when they came in the spring. I knew I couldn’t leave the cardinals.

That night, when Grandma went down to the basement to get some ice cream out of the freezer, I shut the basement door and slid the sturdy bolt into its catch. That way, no matter how much she pounded, the bolt would hold and Grandma couldn’t get out. I didn’t mean to keep her there that long. Just until the cardinals returned.

It was like that day I had sat on the steps to the old cellar and listened to the salesman and my mother laughing together. Then they had stopped laughing and started talking about going away together and never coming back. It was hard to push that big wooden door closed and then lift the heavy iron bar into place in the brackets on either side of the frame. But I was determined and could do lots of things people never imagined I could, just looking at how small I was.

I didn’t mean to keep them there so long either, just until they changed their minds. But there never seemed any good time when I could get Daddy alone and tell him where Mother was.

I like it here in this place. The people are more dependable. If they go away it is just for a little while for something called treatment. Then they always come back. There aren’t any bars on the windows, just a heavy screen mesh.

I write stories about growing up on a farm. In my stories Mother

and Daddy and Jeff and I are all together and nobody ever goes away.

I like it here, but there are times when I wish I could leave. Jeff is married now and has a family, so they don't have room in their house for me. Jeff and his wife come to see me sometimes, on visiting days. Sometimes they bring the children but this makes Jeff nervous for some reason. Jeff has sold the farm to strangers, so I couldn't go back there. I don't really want to anyway. It's just now, while the snow still covers the ground but there is the least hint of spring in the air, that I would like to go back and see if the cardinals have returned.

Behind the Locked Door
by *Peter Lovesey*[4]

A new detective story by Peter Lovesey[5]

first publication in the United States

Peter Lovesey is well known on the mystery scene as a specialist in historical detective stories (a division of the genre in which the late John Dickson Carr was a master). Mr. Lovesey's first book, WOBBLE TO DEATH *(1970), won the Macmillan-Panther First Crime Novel Competition, and introduced Sergeant Cribb and his assistant, Constable Thackeray, two authentic police-officers of the Victorian era who have since appeared in seven other novels.*

Mr. Lovesey's first story in EQMM is not a tale of historical detection, although the story has its roots, its beginnings, in 1840. But the action takes place today — a persistent investigation by Inspector Gent of the C.I.D. Why did the mysterious tenant want that particular flat and be willing to wait nearly a year for it to become vacant? Join Inspector Gent in ferreting out the secret behind the locked door, the unusual secret of the room above the tobacconist's shop...

❖

Sometimes when the shop was quiet Braid would look up at the ceiling and give a thought to the locked room overhead. He was mildly curious, no more. If the police had not taken an interest he would never have done anything about it.

The Inspector appeared one Wednesday soon after eleven, stepping in from Leadenhall Street with enough confidence about him to show he was no tourist. Neither was he in business; it is one of the City's most solemn conventions that between ten and four nobody is seen on the streets in a coat. This one was a brown imitation-leather coat, categorically not City at any hour.

Gaunt and pale, a band of black hair trained across his head to combat baldness, the Inspector stood back from the counter, not interested in buying cigarettes, waiting rather, one hand in a pocket of the coat, the other fingering his woolen tie, while the last genuine customer named his brand and took his change.

When the door was shut he came a step closer and told Braid, “I won’t take up much of your time. Detective Inspector Gent, C.I.D.” The hand that had been in the pocket now exhibited a card. “Routine inquiry. You are Frank Russell Braid, the proprietor of this shop?”

Braid nodded, and moistened his lips. He was perturbed at hearing his name articulated in full like that, as if he were in court. He had never been in trouble with the police, had never done a thing he was ashamed of. Twenty-seven years he had served the public loyally over this counter. He had not received a single complaint he could recollect, or made one. From the small turnover he achieved he had always paid whatever taxes the government imposed.

Some of his customers — bankers, brokers, accountants — made fortunes and talked openly of tax dodges. That was not Frank Braid’s way. He believed in fate. If it was decreed that he should one day be rich, it would happen. Meanwhile he would continue to retail cigarettes and tobacco honestly and without regret.

“I believe you also own the rooms upstairs, sir?”

“Yes.”

“There is a tenant, I understand.”

So Messiter had been up to something. Braid clicked his tongue, thankful that the suspicion was not directed his way, yet irritated at being taken in. From the beginning Messiter had made a good impression. The year of his tenancy had seemed to confirm it. An educated man, decently dressed, interesting to talk to, and completely reliable with the rent. This was a kick in the teeth.

“His name, sir?”

“Messiter.” With deliberation Braid added, “Norman Henry Messiter.”

“How long has Mr. Messiter been a lodger here?”

“ ‘Lodger’ isn’t the word. He uses the rooms as a business address. He lives in Putney. He started paying rent in September last year. That would be thirteen months, wouldn’t it?”

It was obvious from the Inspector’s face that this was familiar information. “Is he upstairs this morning, sir?”

“No. I don’t see a lot of Mr. Messiter. He calls on Tuesdays and Fridays to collect the mail.”

“Business correspondence?”

“I expect so. I don’t examine it.”

“But you know what line Mr. Messiter is in?” It might have been drugs from the way the Inspector put the question.

“He deals in postage stamps.”

“It’s a stamp shop upstairs?”

“No. It’s all done by correspondence. This is simply the address he uses when he writes to other dealers.”

"Odd," the Inspector commented. "I mean, going to the expense of renting rooms when he could just as easily carry on the business from home."

Braid would not be drawn. He would answer legitimate questions, but he was not going to volunteer opinions. He busied himself tearing open a carton of cigarettes.

"So it's purely for business?" the Inspector resumed. "Nothing happens up there?"

That started Braid's mind racing. Nothing *happens*...? What did they suspect? Orgies? Blue films?

"It's an unfurnished flat," he said. "Kitchen, bathroom, and living room. It isn't used."

At that the Inspector rubbed his hands. "Good. In that case you can show me over the place without intruding on anyone's privacy."

It meant closing for a while, but most of his morning regulars had been in by then.

"Thirteen months ago you first met Mr. Messiter," the Inspector remarked on the stairs.

Strictly it was untrue. As it was not put as a question, Braid made no response.

"Handsome set of banisters, these, Mr. Braid. Individually carved, are they?"

"The building is at least two hundred years old," Braid told him, grateful for the distraction. "You wouldn't think so to look at it from Leadenhall Street. You see, the front has been modernized. I wouldn't mind an old-fashioned front if I were selling silk hats or umbrellas, but cigarettes—"

"Need a more contemporary display," the Inspector cut in as if he had heard enough. "Was it thirteen months ago you first met Mr. Messiter?"

Clearly this had some bearing on the police inquiry. It was no use prevaricating. "In point of fact, no. More like two years." As the Inspector's eyebrows peaked in interest, Braid launched into a rapid explanation. "It was purely in connection with the flat. He came in here one day and asked if it was available. Just like that, without even looking over the place. At the time I had a young French couple as tenants. I liked them and I had no intention of asking them to leave. Besides, I know the law. You can't do that sort of thing. I told Mr. Messiter. He said he liked the location so much that he would wait till they moved out, and to show good faith he was ready to pay the first month's rent as a deposit."

"Without even seeing inside?"

"It must seem difficult to credit, but that was how it was," said Braid. "I didn't take the deposit, of course. Candidly, I didn't expect to

see him again. In my line of business you sometimes get people coming in off the street simply to make mischief. Well, the upshot was that he *did* come back — repeatedly. I must have seen the fellow once a fortnight for the next eleven months. I won't say I understood him any better, but at least I knew he was serious. So when the French people eventually went back to Marseilles, Mr. Messiter took over the flat." By now they were standing on the bare boards of the landing. "The accommodation is unfurnished," he said in explanation. "I don't know what you hope to find."

If Inspector Gent knew, he was not saying. He glanced through the open door of the bathroom. The place had the smell of disuse.

He reverted to his theme. "Strange behavior, waiting all that time for a flat he doesn't use." He stepped into the kitchen and tried a tap. Water the color of weak tea spattered out. "No furniture about," he went on. "You must have thought it was odd, his not bringing in furniture."

Braid made no comment. He was waiting by the door of the locked room. This, he knew, was where the interrogation would begin in earnest.

"What's this — the living room?" the Inspector asked. He came to Braid's side and tried the door. "Locked. May I have the key, Mr. Braid?"

"That isn't possible, I'm afraid. Mr. Messiter changed the lock. We — er — came to an agreement."

The Inspector seemed unsurprised. "Paid some more on the rent, did he? I wonder why." He knelt by the door. "Strong lock. Chubb mortice. No good trying to open that with a piece of wire. How did he justify it, Mr. Braid?"

"He said it was for security."

"It's secure, all right." Casually, the Inspector asked, "When did you last see Mr. Messiter?"

"Tuesday." Braid's stomach lurched. "You don't suspect he is—"

"Dead in there? No, sir. Messiter is alive, no doubt of that. Active, I would say." He grinned in a way Braid found disturbing. "But I wouldn't care to force this without a warrant. I'll be arranging that. I'll be back." He started downstairs.

"Wait," said Braid, going after him. "As the landlord, I think I have the right to know what you suspect is locked in that room."

"Nothing dangerous or detrimental to health, sir," the Inspector told him without turning his head. "That's all you need to know. You trusted Messiter enough to let him install his own lock, so with respect you're in no position to complain about rights."

After the Inspector had left, Braid was glad he had not been stung into a response he regretted; but he was angry, and his anger refused

to be subdued through the rest of the morning and afternoon. It veered between the Inspector, Messiter, and himself. He recognized now his mistake in agreeing to a new lock, but to be rebuked like a gullible idiot was unjust. Messiter's request had seemed innocent enough at the time.

Well, to be truthful, it had crossed Braid's mind that what was planned could be an occasional afternoon up there with a girl, but he had no objection to that if it was discreet. He was not narrow-minded. In its two centuries of existence the room must have seen some passion. But crime was quite another thing, not to be countenanced.

He had trusted Messiter, been impressed by his sincerity. The man had seemed genuinely enthusiastic about the flat, its old-world charm, the high corniced ceilings, the solid doors. To wait, as he had, nearly a year for the French people to leave had seemed a commitment, an assurance of good faith.

It was mean and despicable. Whatever was locked in that room had attracted the interest of the police. Messiter must have known this was a possibility when he took the rooms. He had cynically and deliberately put at risk the reputation of the shop. Customers were quick to pick up the taint of scandal. When this got into the papers, years of goodwill and painstaking service would go down the drain.

That afternoon, when Braid's eyes turned to the ceiling, he was not merely curious about the locked room. He was asking questions. Angry, urgent questions.

By six, when he closed, the thing had taken a grip on his mind. He had persuaded himself he had a right to know the extent of Messiter's deceit. Dammit, the room belonged to Braid. He would not sleep without knowing what was behind that locked door.

And he had thought of a way of doing it.

In the back was a wooden ladder about nine feet long. Years before, when the shop was a glover's, it had been used to reach the high shelves behind the counter. Modern shop design kept everything in easy reach. Where gloves had once been stacked in white boxes were displays of Marlboro country and the pure gold of Benson and Hedges. One morning in the summer he had taken the ladder outside the shop to investigate the working of the awning, which was jammed. Standing several rungs from the top he had been able to touch the ledge below the window of the locked room.

The evening exodus was over, consigning Leadenhall Street to surrealistic silence, when Braid propped the ladder against the shopfront. The black marble and dark-tinted glass of banks and insurance buildings glinted funereally in the streetlights, only the brighter windows of the Bull's Head at the Aldgate end indicating, as he began to climb, that life was there. If anyone chanced to pass that

way and challenge him, he told himself, he would inform them with justification that the premises were his own and he was simply having trouble with a lock.

He stepped onto the ledge and drew himself level with the window, which was of the sash type. By using a screwdriver he succeeded in slipping aside the iron catch. The lower section was difficult to move, but once he had got it started it slid easily upward. He climbed inside and took out a flashlight.

The room was empty.

Literally empty. No furniture, no curtains, no carpet. Bare floorboards, ceiling, and walls with paper peeled away in several places.

Uncomprehending, he beamed the flashlight over the floorboards. They had not been disturbed in months. He examined the skirting board, the plaster cornice, and the window sill. He could not see how anything could be hidden here. The police were probably mistaken about Messiter. And so was he. With a sense of shame he climbed out of the window and drew it down.

On Friday, Messiter came in about eleven as usual, relaxed, indistinguishable in dress from the stockbrokers and bankers: dark suit, old boys' tie, shoes gleaming. With a smile he peeled a note from his wallet and bought his box of five Imperial Panatellas, a ritual that from the beginning had signaled goodwill toward his landlord. Braid sometimes wondered if he actually smoked them. He did not carry conviction as a smoker of cigars. He was a quiet man, functioning best in private conversations. Forty-seven by his own admission, he looked ten years younger, dark-haired with brown eyes that moistened when he spoke of things that moved him.

"Any letters for me, Mr. Braid?"

"Five or six." Braid took them from the shelf behind him. "How is business?"

"No reason to complain," Messiter said, smiling. "My work is my hobby, and there aren't many lucky enough to say that. And how is the world of tobacco? Don't tell me. You'll always do a good trade here, Mr. Braid. All the pressures — you can see it in their faces. They need the weed and always will." Mildly he inquired, "Nobody called this week asking for me, I suppose?"

Braid had not intended saying anything, but Messiter's manner disarmed him. That and the shame he felt at the suspicions he had harbored impelled him to say, "Actually there *was* a caller. I had a detective in here — when was it? — Wednesday — asking about you. It was obviously a ridiculous mistake."

He described Inspector Gent's visit without mentioning his own investigation afterward with the ladder. "Makes you wonder what the

police are up to these days," he concluded. "I believe we're all on the computer at Scotland Yard now. This sort of thing is bound to happen."

"You trust me, Mr. Braid. I appreciate that," Messiter said, his eyes starting to glisten. "You took me on trust from the beginning."

"I'm sure you aren't stacking stolen goods upstairs, if that's what you mean," Braid told him with sincerity.

"But the Inspector was not so sure?"

"He said something about a search warrant. Probably by now he has realized his mistake. I don't expect to see him again."

"I wonder what brought him here," Messiter said, almost to himself.

"I wouldn't bother about it. It's a computer error."

"I don't believe so. What did he say about the lock I fitted on the door, Mr. Braid?"

"Oh, at the time he seemed to think it was quite sinister." He grinned. "Don't worry — it doesn't bother me at all. You consulted me about it and you pay a pound extra a week for it, so who am I to complain? What you keep in there — if anything — is your business." He chuckled in a way intended to reassure. "That detective carried on as if you had a fortune hidden away in there."

"Oh, but I have."

Braid felt a pulse throb in his temple.

"It's high time I told you," said Messiter serenely. "I suppose I should apologize for not saying anything before. Not that there's anything criminal, believe me. Actually it's a rather remarkable story. I'm a philatelist, as you know. People smile at that and I don't blame them. Whatever name you give it, stamp collecting is a hobby for kids. In the business we're a little sensitive on the matter. We dignify it with its own technology — dies and watermarks and so forth — but I've always suspected this is partly to convince ourselves that the whole thing is serious and important.

"Well, it occurred to me four or five years ago that there was a marvelous way of justifying stamp collecting to myself and that was by writing a book about stamps. You must have heard of Rowland Hill, the fellow who started the whole thing off?"

"The Penny Post?"

Messiter nodded. "1840 — the world's first postage stamps, the One-Penny Black and the Twopence Blue. My idea was not to write a biography of Hill — that's been done several times over by cleverer writers than I am — but to analyze the way his idea caught on. The response of the Victorian public was absolutely phenomenal, you know. It's all in the newspapers of the period. I went to the Newspaper Library at Colindale to do my research. I spent weeks over

it."

Messiter's voice conveyed not fatigue at the memory, but excitement. "There was so much to read. Reports of Parliament. Letters to the Editor. Special articles describing the collection and delivery of the mail." He paused, pointing a finger at Braid. "You're wondering what this has to do with the room upstairs. I'll tell you. Whether it was providence or pure good luck I wouldn't care to say, but one afternoon in that Newspaper Library I turned up *The Times* for a day in May 1841, and my eye was caught — riveted, I should say — by an announcement in the Personal Column on the front page."

Messiter's hand went to his pocket and withdrew his wallet. From it he took a folded piece of paper. "This is what I saw."

Braid took it from him, a photostat of what was unquestionably a column of old newspaper type. The significant words had been scored round in ballpoint.

> *A Young Lady, being desirous of covering her dressing-room with cancelled postage stamps, has been so far encouraged in her wish by private friends as to have succeeded in collecting 16,000. These, however, being insufficient, she will be greatly obliged if any good-natured person who may have these otherwise worthless little articles at their disposal, would assist her in her whimsical project. Address to Miss E. D., Mr. Butt's, Glover, Leadenhall Street.*

Braid made the connection instantly. His throat went dry. He read it again. And again.

"You understand?" said Messiter. "It's a stamp man's dream — a room literally papered with Penny Blacks!"

"But this was—"

"1841. Right. More than a century ago. Have you ever looked through a really old newspaper? It's quite astonishing how easy it is to get caught up in the immediacy of the events. When I read that announcement, I could see that dressing room vividly in my imagination — chintz curtains, gas brackets, brass bedstead, washstand and mirror. I could see Miss E. D. with her paste pot and brush assiduously covering the wall with stamps.

"It was such an exciting idea that it came as a jolt to realize that it all had happened so long ago that Miss E. D. must have died about the turn of the century. And what of her dressing room? That, surely, must have gone, if not in the Blitz, then in the wholesale rebuilding of the City. My impression of Leadenhall Street was that the banks and insurance companies had lined it from end to end with gleaming office buildings five stories high. Even if by some miracle the shop that had been Butt's the Glover's *had* survived, and Miss E. D.'s room *had* been

over the shop, common sense told me that those stamps must long since have been stripped from the walls."

He paused and lighted a cigar. Braid waited, his heart pounding.

"Yet there was a possibility, remote but tantalizing and irresistible, that someone years ago redecorated the room by papering *over* the stamps. Any decorator will tell you they sometimes find layer on layer of wallpaper. Imagine peeling back the layers to find thousands of Penny Blacks and Twopence Blues unknown to the world of philately! These days the commonest ones are catalogued at ten pounds or so, but find some rarities — inverted watermarks, special cancellations — and you could be up to five hundred pounds a stamp. Maybe a thousand pounds. Mr. Braid, I don't exaggerate when I tell you the value of such a room could run to half a million pounds. Half a million for what that young lady in her innocence called worthless little articles'!"

As if he read the thought, Messiter said, "It was my discovery. I went to a lot of trouble. Eventually I found the *Post Office Directory* for 1845 in the British Library. The list of residents in Leadenhall Street included a glover by the name of Butt."

"So you got the number of this shop?" Messiter nodded. "And when you came to Leadenhall Street, here it was, practically the last pre-Victorian building this side of Lloyd's?"

Messiter drew on his cigar, scrutinizing Braid.

"All those stamps," Braid whispered. "Twenty-seven years I've owned this shop and the flat without knowing that in the room upstairs was a fortune. It took you to tell me that."

"Don't get the idea it was easy for me," Messiter pointed out. "Remember I waited practically a year for those French people to move out. That was a test of character, believe me, not knowing what I would find when I took possession."

Strangely, Braid felt less resentment toward Messiter than the young Victorian woman who had lived in this building, *his* building, and devised a pastime so sensational in its consequence that his own walls mocked him.

Messiter leaned companionably across the counter. "Don't look so shattered, chum. I'm not the rat you take me for. Why do you think I'm telling you this?"

Braid shrugged. "I really couldn't say."

"Think about it. As your tenant, I did nothing underhanded. When I took the flat, didn't I raise the matter of redecoration? You said I was free to go ahead whenever I wished. I admit you didn't know then that the walls were covered in Penny Blacks, but I wasn't certain myself till I peeled back the old layers of paper. What a moment that was!"

He paused, savoring the recollection. “I’ve had a great year thanks to those stamps. In fact, I’ve set myself up for some time to come. Best of all, I had the unique experience of finding that room.” He flicked ash from the cigar. “I estimate there are still upwards of twenty thousand stamps up there, Mr. Braid. In all justice, they belong to you.”

Braid stared in amazement.

“I’m serious,” Messiter went on. “I’ve made enough to buy a place in the country and write my book. The research is finished. That’s been my plan for years, to earn some time, and I’ve done it. I want no more.”

Frowning, Braid said, “I don’t understand why you’re doing this. Is it because of the police? You said there was nothing dishonest.”

“And I meant it, but you are right, Mr. Braid. I am a little shaken to hear of your visit from the Inspector.”

“What do you mean?”

Messiter asked obliquely, “When you read your newspaper, do you ever bother with the financial pages?”

Braid gave him a long look. Messiter held his stare.

“If it really has any bearing on this, the answer is no. I don’t have much interest in the stock market. Nor any capital to invest,” he added.

“Just as well in these uncertain times,” Messiter commented. “Blue-chip investments have been hard to find these last few years. That’s why people have been putting their money into other things. Art, for instance. A fine work of art holds its value in real terms even in a fluctuating economy. So do jewelry and antiques. And old postage stamps, Mr. Braid. Lately a lot of money has been invested in old stamps.”

“That I can understand.”

“Then you must also understand that information such as this” — he put his hand on the photostat between them — “is capable of causing flutters of alarm. Over the last year or so I have sold to dealers a number of early English stamps unknown to the market. These people are not fools. Before they buy a valuable stamp, they like to know the history of its ownership. I have had to tell them my story and show them the story in *Times.* That’s all right. Generally they need no more convincing. But do you understand the difficulty? It’s the prospect of twenty thousand Penny Blacks and Twopence Blues unknown to the stamp world shortly coming onto the market. Can you imagine the effect?”

“I suppose it will reduce the value of those stamps people already own.”

“Precisely. The rarities will not be so rare. Rumors begin, and it

isn't long before there is a panic and stamp prices tumble."

"Which is when the sharks move in," said Braid. "I see it now. The police probably suspect the whole thing is a fraud."

Messiter gave a nod.

"But you and I know it isn't a fraud," Braid went on. "We can show them the room. I still don't understand why you are giving it up."

"I told you the reason. I always planned to write my book. And there is something else. It's right to warn you that there is sure to be publicity over this. Newspapers, television — this is the kind of story they relish, the unknown Victorian girl, the stamps undiscovered for over a century. Mr. Braid, I value my privacy. I don't care for my name being printed in the newspapers. It will happen, I'm sure, but I don't intend to be around when it does. That's why I am telling nobody where I am going. After the whole thing has blown over, I'll send you a forwarding address, if you would be so kind—"

"Of course, but—"

A customer came in, one of the regulars. Braid gave him a nod and wished he had gone to the kiosk up the street.

Messiter picked up the conversation. "Was it a month's notice we agreed? I'll see that my bank settles the rent." He took the keys of the flat from his pocket and put them on the counter with the photostat. "For you. I won't need these again." Putting a hand on Braid's arm, he added, "Some time we must meet and have a drink to Miss E. D.'s memory."

He turned and left the shop and the customer asked for 20 Rothmans. Braid lifted his hand in a belated salute through the shop window and returned to his business. More customers came in. Fridays were always busy with people collecting their cigarettes for the weekend. He was thankful for the activity. It compelled him to adjust by degrees and accept that he was now a rich man. Unlike Messiter, he would not object to the story getting into the press. Some of these customers who had used the shop for years and scarcely acknowledged him as a human being would choke on their toast and marmalade when they saw his name one morning in *The Times.*

It satisfied him most to recover what he owned. When Messiter had disclosed the secret of the building, it was as if the 27 years of Braid's tenure were obliterated. The place was full of Miss E. D. That young lady — she would always be young — had in effect asserted her prior claim. He had doubted if he would ever again believe the building was truly his own. But now that her "whimsical project" had been ceded to him, he was going to take pleasure in dismantling the design, stamp by stamp, steadily accumulating a fortune Miss E. D. had never supposed would accrue. Vengeful it might be, but it would

exorcise her from the building that belonged to him.

Ten minutes before closing time Inspector Gent entered the shop. As before, he waited for the last customer to leave.

"Sorry to disturb you again, sir. I have that warrant now."

"You won't need it," Braid cheerfully told him. "I have the key. Mr. Messiter was here this morning." He started to recount the conversation.

"Then I suppose he took out his cutting from *Times,"* put in the Inspector.

"You *know* about that?"

"Do I?" he said caustically. "The man has been round just about every stamp shop north of Birmingham telling the tale of that young woman and the Penny Blacks on her dressing-room wall." Braid frowned. "There's nothing dishonest in that. The story really did appear in *The Times,* didn't it?"

"It did, sir. We checked. And this *is* the address mentioned." The Inspector eyed him expressionlessly. "The trouble is that the Penny Blacks our friend Messiter has been selling in the north aren't off any dressing-room wall. He buys them from a dealer in London, common specimens, about ten pounds each one. Then he works on them."

"Works on them? What do you mean?"

"Penny Blacks are valued according to the plates they were printed from, sir. There are distinctive markings on each of the plates, most particularly in the shape of the guide letters that appear in the comers. The stamps Messiter has been selling are doctored to make them appear rare. He buys a common Plate 6 stamp in London, touches up the guide letters, and sells it to a Manchester dealer as a Plate 11 stamp for seventy-five pounds. As it's catalogued at more than twice that, the dealer thinks he has a bargain. Messiter picks his victims carefully: generally they aren't specialists in early English stamps, but almost any dealer is ready to look at a Penny Black in case it's a rare one."

Braid shook his head. "I don't understand this at all. Why should Messiter have needed to resort to forgery? There are twenty thousand stamps upstairs."

"Have you seen them?"

"No, but the newspaper story—"

"That fools everyone, sir."

"You said it was genuine."

"It is. And the idea of a roomful of Penny Blacks excites people's imagination. They *want* to believe it. That's the secret of all the best confidence tricks. Now why do you suppose Messiter had a mortice lock fitted on that room? You thought it was because the contents were worth a fortune? Has it occurred to you as a possibility that he

didn't want anyone to know there was nothing there?"

Braid's dream disintegrated.

"It stands to reason, doesn't it," the Inspector went on, "that the stamps were stripped off the wall generations ago? When Messiter found empty walls, he couldn't abandon the idea. It had taken a grip on him. That young woman who thought of papering her wall with stamps could never have supposed she would be responsible over a century later for turning a man to crime."

The Inspector held out his hand. "If I could have that key, sir, I'd like to see the room for myself."

Braid followed the Inspector upstairs and watched him unlock the door. They entered the room.

"I don't mind admitting I have a sneaking admiration for Messiter," the Inspector said. "Imagine the poor beggar coming in here at last after going to all the trouble he did to find the place. Look, you can see where he peeled back the wallpaper layer by layer" — gripping a furl of paper, he drew it casually aside — "to find absolutely—" He stopped. "My God!"

The stamps were there, neatly pasted in rows.

Braid said nothing, but the blood slowly drained from his face.

Miss E. D.'s scheme of interior decoration had been more ambitious than anyone expected. She had diligently inked over every stamp with red, purple, or green ink — to form an intricate mosaic of colors. Originally Penny Blacks or Twopence Blues, Plate 6 or Plate 11, they were now as she had described them in *The Times* — "worthless little articles."

Evensong
by *Francis M. Nevins, Jr.* [6]

"He felt a return of the old terror" and then "the old terror and guilt vanished... He was a professional again..."

❖

For nine years his work had compelled him to take short flights to cities he had never seen before, but the queasy feeling in his stomach every time he was in the air refused to go away, and once in a while he would wonder if he was in the right business. That Sunday afternoon in mid-February he played in luck. Eastern's flight from New York to Atlanta was smooth as kitten fur, no choppy air, no sudden dips or jolts, no circling above the destination like a lost soul. The whisperjet touched down at 3:27 P.M. Plenty of time. The cathedral service didn't begin till 5:45.

He strolled unhurriedly up the long corridor to the terminal entrance. Casual, keep it casual. He browsed through the paperbacks at the magazine stand, then relaxed as best he could in a seat in the main lounge. The thought of a cocktail in the airport bar tempted him but he resisted. Not professional. At 3:50 he took the escalator to the lower level and purchased a round-trip ticket on the limousine. A cab would have given him more privacy and a chance to unwind before work, but the risk wasn't worth it.

Again he played in luck. Just enough passengers boarded the limo so that he blended in satisfactorily. He doubted that they would remember a thing about him. As directed, he gave the Riviera Hyatt as his destination.

The springlike mildness of the day was tonic after the New York chill. He congratulated himself on not wearing an overcoat for the trip and tried to shut down his mind and nerves as the car whisked north on Interstate 85 through light traffic. Sounds and images of his boyhood echoed inside him. Snatches of antiphon and response from the Mass. Phrases from the Baltimore catechism the nuns had made everyone memorize. High pre-adolescent voices singing the *O salutaris hostia*, and the other Benediction hymn, *Tantum ergo sacramentum.* The sweet heavy odor of incense wafting from the half darkness of the altar. It had been 17 years since he had set foot in a church, and he almost dreaded to visit the cathedral this afternoon, but the mission had fallen to him and *O salutaris hostia* someone had to do it.

When the limo set him down in the Hyatt parking lot he crossed to the other side of Peachtree Road, as directed, and waited at the MARTA stop for the bus marked “23 Oglethorpe.” He stood in the glory of the afternoon and savored the gentle breeze and thought about the girl’s face, resurrecting her image in his mind’s eye, conjuring up her features from the photographs he had been sent and focusing mentally on them until he was satisfied he would know her as soon as he saw her.

The wait was longer than he’d been told; the bus must be off schedule. When it finally drew up at the stop and he paid the fare and took a rear seat, he shot a glance at his wristwatch and knew he would not be in time for the beginning of the service, for the procession of the choir up the aisle of the cathedral to the altar. He had wanted very much to arrive early. There was always the chance that she could have got sick, or that some other reason would keep her from taking part in the evening’s service. If the timing had been better he could have watched the choir in procession and made sure she was among them. He felt unease return to his stomach. The faulty timing was unavoidable, as it had been on his last mission, but he might be blamed anyway.

Impatiently he read off the cross-street signs, resisting the impulse to sneak glances at his watch every few moments. The landmarks he’d been told to watch for slid past the bus window, first the Peachtree Battle Shopping Center, then two churches next to one another a few blocks farther on. And then he saw it, across Peachtree from the adjacent churches and one block beyond them. St. Philip’s Cathedral. As directed, he stayed on the MARTA bus for three more blocks, then got off and walked back. Quickly.

Massive in tan stone, the cathedral stood on a small hill, surrounded by the warm blue of the sky. He strode up the paved pathway to the entrance doors and let himself in. As he adjusted his sight to the dimness of the vestibule an usher offered him a leaflet. Above a red-tinted artist’s rendition of the building the heading THE CATHEDRAL OF SAINT PHILIP IN THE CITY OF ATLANTA was printed in Gothic script, and then in larger ornate letters THE OFFICE OF SOLEMN EVENSONG. He smiled vacantly, folded and pocketed the brochure, and passed into the cathedral proper, down the long aisle to an empty pew.

The service had already begun. Behind the ornately carved altar he could make out tiny violet-robed figures. Their voices rose, filling the church with the sounds of a hymn he didn’t remember. Maybe it was part of the new liturgy; he had been away from church for so many years, and a lot of things seemed to have changed. The altar cloths and the priest’s vestments were rich violet, the Lenten color of

his youth. The awesome stained-glass windows, the red-padded kneeling benches brought back memories of Sunday morning Mass at Our Lady of Sorrows.

He felt a return of the old terror, the sense that he was under judgment, that those open vaulting spaces high overhead were full of invisible all-seeing powers. He tried to concentrate his thoughts on the distant altar, on the loveliness of the voices lifted in sacred song, and wondered if the woman he had come for was really in the choir.

But his mind fought back, kept driving him backward in time to his youth. The catechism questions. *Who made the world? God made the world.* The indoctrination in the dogmas of the One True Faith. The gagging fear they instilled in him, that in a lightning flash of divine vengeance he would die suddenly and alone and in a state of mortal sin, and would suffer unbearable torments in hell, forever and ever and ever... The long-forgotten terror was so vivid he almost rushed out of the cathedral. *Give me the children, and they are mine for life.* One of the Popes had said that. Or was it Lenin, or Napoleon? Maybe all three of them had said it.

There were no more than 30 worshippers scattered through the cathedral, and he made himself watch them so that he would know when to stand or sit or kneel, following the others' lead a split second later. Prayers and psalms were sung, there was a reading from the Old Testament, then another hymn and a reading from the Gospels and the recitation of the Creed which he found he still remembered word for word. The rite kept sweeping him back in time, so that he might almost have forgotten what he had come here to do. He flexed his powerful tapered fingers in preparation and waited.

And at last the ceremony ended. The violet-robed choir emerged from behind the altar in recessional, still singing, gliding back up the aisle to the rear of the cathedral. Ahead of the double file of choristers a priest marched, holding a tall gold crucifix aloft. He saw the worshippers in the pews in front of him bow their heads as the cross passed them, and he bowed too but kept his eyes open, concentrating on the faces of the singers as they went by. Not that one, not the next one — there, there she was, the tall one with the light brown hair and the harlequin-framed glasses. She moved up the aisle as if in a trance, eyes fixed on the open hymnal in her hands as she sang.

When the last of the choir had glided out of sight the worshipers slowly began to file out of their pews. He hung back until all but a few stragglers had left. Then he retreated up the aisle to the empty hush of the vestibule and waited. The choir room was somewhere in the basement, he had been told. They would deposit their robes in a closet until next Sunday and say their goodbyes and separate, each person leaving by whatever exit was nearest to his or her car. The girl he had

come for would return up the staircase to the vestibule and leave through the main doors. That was what he had been told and he had to accept it. He paced the vestibule in silent discomfort and wished it didn't have to be done in a church.

And then, when he removed the brochure from his pocket and studied it more closely and realized that all the time he had been in an Episcopal not a Catholic cathedral and hadn't known it, he almost laughed aloud, and the old terror and guilt vanished in an instant. He was a professional again.

Footsteps tapped sharply, rising, and he positioned himself beside the doorway at the head of the stairs. She walked past him without looking behind her. She wore blue jeans and a blue denim jacket and high reddish-brown boots. "Miss Smith?" he said softly. "May Smith?"

She swung around. The two of them were alone in the dim empty vestibule. "Yes?" Her eyes widened slightly behind the harlequin-framed glasses. She was the one all right. It was a shame she was so beautiful.

"Company," he said. "Please take me to your car."

She did not turn pale or show any sign of fear. She didn't even blink. It was as if she had known what to expect, or maybe she just didn't care any more. "This way," she said, and led him along a branch corridor to an unobtrusive exit door, then through four interconnected parking lots that sloped down the far side of the hill. He flexed his fingers as he walked beside her in the softly falling twilight, and wondered absently why she had parked so far away.

A dark green sedan stood alone at the rear of the remotest lot, glistening in the last of the light. "You drive," he said. She unlocked the front passenger door and slid across the seat. He entered after her, looked at her with a sort of envy as she sat stoically behind the wheel. None of the others had been so calm, and he wondered how she managed it. "Drive," he instructed her. "I'll give directions as we go."

"No," said a deep quiet voice from the rear seat. He felt the cold kiss of steel on his neck. "Company," the voice continued, and something inside him shriveled to dust. "Don't turn around, brother, just relax. Miss Smith, your part is completed. Leave the ignition key in the lock and walk home. The car will be thoroughly cleaned and you'll find it in front of your apartment in the morning."

"Thank you," she said, and let herself out the driver's door and shut it gently but firmly behind her.

He was alone now in the sudden darkness with the voice of the unseen. Alone, and knowing in the pit of his soul that if he was lucky, if it all was a myth, in a minute or less than a minute, after the sudden awful pain, he would feel nothing, nothing, ever again.

"Are you allowed to tell me why?" he asked.

“The last one,” the unseen told him. “You missed connections and didn’t do the job. You were sent on this one to be the recipient, not the agent. You weren’t forgiven.”

“My God, that wasn’t my fault!” he almost screamed. “I couldn’t help—”

“Not forgiven,” the voice repeated solemnly.

As the fingers of the unseen one in the back seat squeezed tight around his neck, and the pain and blackness closed in, he tried desperately to remember the words of the Act of Contrition.

The Ehrengraf Obligation
by *Lawrence Block* [7]

A new Ehrengraf story by Lawrence Block

Martin H. Ehrengraf, the criminal lawyer (and we do mean criminal lawyer), was not particularly choosy about his clients. He didn't have to be. Every single Ehrengraf client was innocent — that was the invariable presumption. But there was one kind of client Ehrengraf would move heaven and earth to defend — a poet, especially a penniless poet. Penniless? Does that strike you as odd for Ehrengraf? Well, no. The fee, you understand, was never a problem with Ehrengraf — he saw to that...

❖

William Telliford gave his head a tentative scratch, in part because it itched, in part out of puzzlement. It itched because he had been unable to wash his lank brown hair during the four days he'd thus far spent in jail. He was puzzled because this dapper little man before him was proposing to get him out of jail.

"I don't understand," he said. "The court appointed an attorney for me. A younger man — I think he said his name was Trabner. You're not associated with him or anything, are you?"

"Certainly not."

"Your name is—"

"Martin Ehrengraf."

"Well, I appreciate your coming to see me, Mr. Ehrengraf, but I've already got a lawyer, this Mr. Trabner, and—"

"Are you satisfied with Mr. Trabner?"

Telliford lowered his eyes, focusing his gaze on the little lawyer's shoes, a pair of highly polished black wing tips. "I suppose he's all right," he said slowly.

"But?"

"But he doesn't believe I'm innocent. I mean, he seems to take it for granted I'm guilty and the best thing I can do is plead guilty to manslaughter or something. He's talking in terms of making some kind of deal with the District Attorney, like it's a foregone conclusion that I have to go to prison and the only question is for how long."

"Then you've answered my question," Ehrengraf said, a smile flickering on his thin lips. "You're unsatisfied with your lawyer. The

court has appointed him. It remains for you to disappoint him, as it were, and to engage me in his stead. You have the right to do this, you know."

"But I don't have the money. Trabner was going to defend me for free, which is about as much as I can afford. I don't know what kind of fees you charge for something like this but I'll bet they're substantial. That suit of yours didn't come from the Salvation Army."

Ehrengraf beamed. His suit, charcoal-gray flannel with a nipped-in waist, had been made for him by a most exclusive tailor. His shirt was pink, with a button-down collar. His vest was a tattersall check, red and black on a cream background, and his tie showed half-inch stripes of red and charcoal-gray. "My fees are on the high side," he said. "To undertake your defense I would ordinarily set a fee of eighty thousand dollars."

"Eighty dollars would strain my budget," William Telliford said. "Eighty thousand — well, it might take me ten years to earn that much."

"But I propose to defend you free of charge, sir."

William Telliford stared, not least because he could not recall the last time anyone had called him *sir*. He was, it must be said, a rather unprepossessing young man, tending to slouch and sprawl. His jeans needed patching at the knees. His plaid flannel shirt needed washing and ironing. His chukka boots needed soles and heels, and his socks needed to be replaced altogether.

"But—"

"But why?"

Telliford nodded.

"Because you are a poet," said Martin Ehrengraf.

"Poets," said Ehrengraf, "are the unacknowledged legislators of the universe."

"That's beautiful," Robin Littlefield said. She didn't know just what to make of this little man but he was certainly impressive. "Could you say that again? I want to remember it."

"Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the universe. But don't credit me with the observation. Shelley said it first."

"Is she your wife?"

The lawyer's deeply set dark eyes narrowed perceptibly. "Percy Bysshe Shelley," he said gently. "Born 1792, died 1822. The poet."

"Oh."

"So your young man is one of the world's unacknowledged legislators. Or you might prefer the lines Arthur O'Shaughnessy wrote. 'We are the music-makers, and we are the dreamers of dreams.' You know the poem?"

"I don't think so."

"I like the second stanza," said Ehrengraf, and tilted his head to one side and quoted it:

> " 'With wonderful deathless ditties
> We build up the world's great cities,
> And out of a fabulous story
> We fashion an empire's glory:
> One man with a dream, at pleasure,
> Shall go forth and conquer a crown;
> And three with a new song's measure
> Can trample an empire down.' "

"You have a wonderful way of speaking. But I, uh, I don't really know much about poetry."

"You reserve your enthusiasm for Mr. Telliford's poems, no doubt."

"Well, I like it when Bill reads them to me. I like the way they sound, but I'll have to admit I don't always know what he's getting at."

Ehrengraf beamed and spread his hands. "But they sound good, don't they? Miss Littlefield, dare we require more of a poem than that it please our ears? I don't read much modern poetry, Miss Littlefield. I prefer the bards of an earlier and more innocent age. Their verses are often simpler, but I don't pretend to understand any number of my favorite poems. Half the time I don't know just what Blake's getting at, Miss Littlefield, but that doesn't keep me from enjoying his work. That sonnet of your young man's, that poem about riding a train across Kansas and looking at the moon. I'm sure you remember it."

"Sort of."

"He writes of the moon 'stroking desperate tides in the liquid land.' That's a lovely line, Miss Littlefield, and who cares whether the poem itself is fully comprehensible? Who'd raise such a niggling point? William Telliford is a poet and I'm under an obligation to defend him. I'm certain he couldn't have murdered that woman."

Robin gnawed a thumbnail. "The police are pretty sure he did it," she said. "The fire ax was missing from the hallway of our building and the glass case where it was kept was smashed open. And Janice Penrose, he used to live with her before he met me — well, they say he was still going around her place sometimes when I was working at the diner. And they never found the fire ax, but Bill came home with his jeans and shirt covered with blood and couldn't remember what happened. And he was seen in Jan's neighborhood, and he'd been drinking, plus he smoked a lot of dope that afternoon and he was

always taking pills. Ups and downs, like, plus some green capsules he stole from somebody's medicine chest and we were never quite sure what they were, but they do weird things to your head."

"The artist is so often the subject of his own experiment," Ehrengraf said sympathetically. "Think of DeQuincey. Consider Coleridge, waking from an opium dream with all of *Kubla Khan* fixed in his mind, just waiting for him to write it down. Of course he was interrupted by that dashed man from Porlock, but the lines he did manage to save are so wonderful. You know the poem, Miss Littlefield?"

"I think we had to read it in school."

"Perhaps."

"Or didn't he write something about an albatross? Some guy shot an albatross, something like that."

"Something like that."

"The thing is," William Telliford said, "the more I think about it, the more I come to the conclusion that I must have killed Jan. I mean, who else would kill her?"

"You're innocent," Ehrengraf told him.

"You really think so? I can't remember what happened that day. I was doing some drugs and hitting the wine pretty good, and then I found this bottle of bourbon that I didn't think we still had, and I started drinking that, and that's about the last thing I remember. I must have gone right into blackout and the next thing I knew I was walking around covered with blood. And I've got a way of being violent when I'm drunk. When I lived with Jan I beat her up a few times, and I did the same with Robin. That's one of the reasons Robin's father hates me."

"Her father hates you?"

"Despises me. Oh, I can't really blame him. He's this self-made man with more money than he can count and I'm squeezing by on food stamps. There's not much of a living in poetry."

"It's an outrage."

"Right. When Robin and I moved in together — well, her old man had a fit. Up to then he was laying a pretty heavy check on her the first of every month, but as soon as she moved in with me that was the end of that song. No more money for her. Here's her little brother going to this fancy private school and her mother dripping in sables and emeralds and diamonds and mink, and here's Robin slinging hash in a greasy spoon because her father doesn't care for the company she's keeping."

"Interesting."

"The man really hates me. Some people take to me and some

people don't, but he just couldn't stomach me. Thought I was the lowest of the low. It really grinds a person down, you know. All the pressure he was putting on Robin, and both of us being as broke as we were, I tell you, it reached the point where I couldn't get any writing done."

"That's terrible," Ehrengraf said, his face clouded with concern. "The poetry left you?"

"That's what happened. It just wouldn't come to me. I'd sit there all day staring at a blank sheet of paper, and finally I'd say the hell with it and fire up a joint or get into the wine, and there's another day down the old chute. And then finally I found that bottle of bourbon and the next thing I knew" — the poet managed a brave smile — "well, according to you, I'm innocent."

"Of course you are innocent, sir."

"I wish I was convinced of that, Mr. Ehrengraf. I don't even see how *you* can be convinced."

"Because you are a poet," the diminutive attorney said. "Because, further, you are a client of Martin H. Ehrengraf. My clients are always innocent. That is the Ehrengraf presumption. Indeed, my income depends on the innocence of my clients."

"I don't follow you."

"It's simple enough. My fees, as we've said, are quite high. But I collect them only if my efforts are successful. If a client of mine goes to prison, Mr. Telliford, he pays me nothing. I'm not even reimbursed for my expenses."

"That's incredible," Telliford said. "I never heard of anything like that. Do many lawyers work that way?"

"I believe I'm the only one. It's a pity more don't take up the custom. Other professionals as well, for that matter. Consider how much higher the percentage of successful operations might be if surgeons were paid on the basis of their results."

"Isn't that the truth. Hey, you know what's ironic?"

"What?"

"Mr. Littlefield. Robin's father. He could pay you that eighty thousand out of petty cash and never miss it. That's the kind of money he's got. But the way he feels about me, he'd pay to me to prison, not to keep me out of it. In other words, if you worked for him you'd only get paid if you *lost* your case. Don't you think that's ironic?"

"Yes," said Ehrengraf. "I do indeed."

When William Telliford stepped into Ehrengraf's office, the lawyer scarcely recognized him. The poet's beard was gone and his hair had received the attention of a fashionable barber. His jacket was black velvet, his trousers a cream-colored flannel. He was wearing a

raw silk shirt and a bold paisley ascot.

He smiled broadly at Ehrengraf's reaction. "I guess I look different," he said.

"Different," Ehrengraf agreed.

"Well, I don't have to live like a slob now." The young man sat down in one of Ehrengraf's chairs, shot his cuff and checked the time on an oversized gold watch. "Robin'll be coming by for me in half an hour," he said, "but I wanted to take the time to let you know how much I appreciated what you tried to do for me. You believed in my innocence when I didn't even have that much faith in myself. And I'm sure you would have been terrific in the courtroom if it had come to that."

"Fortunately it didn't."

"Right, but whoever would have guessed how it would turn out? Imagine old Jasper Littlefield killing Jan to frame me and get me out of his daughter's life. That's really a tough one to swallow. But he came over looking for Robin, and he found me drunk, and then it was evidently just a matter of taking the fire ax out of the case and taking me along with him to Jan's place and killing her and smearing her blood all over me. I must have been in worse than a blackout when it happened. I must have been passed out cold for him to be sure I wouldn't remember any of it."

"So it would seem."

"The police never did find the fire ax, and I wondered about that at the time. What I'd done with it, I mean, because deep down inside I really figured I must have been guilty. But what happened was Mr. Littlefield took the ax along with him, and then when he went crazy it was there for him to use."

"And use it he did."

"He sure did," Telliford said. "According to some psychologist they interviewed for one of the papers, he must have been repressing his basic instincts all his life. When he killed Jan to frame me, it set something off inside him, some undercurrent of violence he'd been smothering for years and years. One night he couldn't keep the lid on, and he went and killed his wife and son while they slept."

"At least they didn't suffer," Ehrengraf murmured.

"That's something. Then he realized what he'd done and made a phone call to the police, and at the same time he told them how he'd murdered Jan."

"Considerate of him," said Ehrengraf, "to make that phone call."

"I'll have to give him that," the poet said. "And then, before the cops could get there to pick him up, he used the ax to cut through the veins in his wrists and bled to death."

"And you're a free man."

“And glad of it,” Telliford said. “I’ll tell you, it looks to me as though I’m sitting on top of the world. Robin’s crazy about me and I’m all she’s got in the world — me and the couple of million bucks her father left her. With the rest of the family dead she inherits every penny. No more slinging hash. No more starving in a garret. No more dressing like a slob. You like my new wardrobe?”

“It’s quite a change,” Ehrengraf said diplomatically.

“Well, I realize now that I was getting sick of the way I looked, the life I was leading. Now I can live the way I want. I’ve got the freedom to do as I please with my life.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“And you’re the man who believed in me when nobody else did, myself included.” Telliford smiled with genuine warmth. “I can’t tell you how grateful I am. I was talking with Robin, and I had the idea that we ought to pay you your fee. You didn’t actually get me off, of course, but your system is that you get paid no matter how your client gets off, just so he doesn’t wind up in jail. That’s how you explained it, isn’t it?”

“That’s right.”

“That’s what I said to Robin. But she said we didn’t have any agreement to pay you eighty thousand dollars — as a matter of fact we didn’t have any agreement to pay you anything, because you volunteered your services. In fact, I would have gotten off the same way with my court-appointed attorney. I said that wasn’t the point, but Robin said after all it’s her money and she didn’t see the point of giving you an eighty-thousand-dollar handout, that you were obviously well off and didn’t need charity.”

“Her father’s daughter, I’d say.”

“Huh? Anyway, it’s her money and her decision to make, but I got her to agree that we’d pay for any expenses you had. So if you can come up with a figure—”

Ehrengraf shook his head. “You don’t owe me a cent,” he insisted. “I took your case out of a sense of obligation. And your lady friend is quite correct — I am not a charity case. Furthermore, my expenses on your behalf were extremely low, and in any case I should be more than happy to stand the cost myself.”

“Well, if you’re absolutely certain—”

“Quite certain, thank you.” Ehrengraf smiled. “I’m most satisfied with the outcome of the case. Of course I regret the loss of Miss Littlefield’s mother and brother, but at least there’s a happy ending to it all. You’re out of prison, you have no worries about money, your future is assured, and you can return to the serious business of writing poetry.”

“Yeah,” Telliford said.

"Is something wrong?"

"Not really. Just what you said about poetry."

"Oh?"

"I suppose I'll get back to it sooner or later."

"Don't tell me your muse has deserted you?"

"Oh, I don't know," the young man said nervously. "It's just that, oh, I don't really seem to care much about poetry now, you know what I mean?"

"I'm not sure that I do."

"Well, I've got everything I want, you know? I've got the money to go all over the world and try all the things I've always wanted to try, and, oh, poetry just doesn't seem very important any more." He laughed. "I remember what a kick I used to get when I'd check the mailbox and some little magazine would send me a check for one of my poems. Now what I usually got was fifty cents a line for poems, and that's from the magazines that paid anything, and most of them just gave you copies of the issue with the poem in it and that was that. That sonnet you liked, *a Train Through Kansas,* the magazine that took it paid me twenty-five cents a line. So I made three dollars and fifty cents for that poem, and by the time I submitted it here and there and everywhere, hell, my postage came to pretty nearly as much as I got for it."

"It's a scandal."

"But the thing is, when I didn't have any money, even a little check helped. Now, though, it's hard to take the whole thing seriously. But besides that, I just don't get poetic ideas any more. And I just don't feel it." He forced a smile. "It's funny. Getting away from poetry hasn't been bothering me, but now that I'm talking with you about it I find myself feeling bad. As though by giving up poetry I'm letting you down or something."

"You're not letting *me* down," Ehrengraf said. "But to dismiss the talent you have, to let it languish—"

"Well, I just don't know if I've got it any more," Telliford said. "That's the whole thing. I sit down and try to write a poem and it's just not *there,* you know what I mean? And Robin says why waste my time, that nobody really cares about poetry nowadays anyway, and I figure maybe she's right."

"Her father's daughter."

"Huh? Well, I'll tell you something that's ironic, anyway. I was having trouble writing poetry before I went to jail, what with the hassles from Robin's old man and all our problems and getting into the wine and the grass too much. And now I'm having more troubles, now that we've got plenty of money and Robin's father's out of our hair. But you know when I was really having no trouble at all?"

"When?"

"During the time I was in jail. There I was, stuck in that rotten cell with a lifetime in the penitentiary staring me in the face, and I swear I was averaging a poem every day. My mind was just clicking along. And I was writing good stuff, too." The young man drew an alligator billfold from the breast pocket of the velvet jacket, removed and unfolded a sheet of paper. "You liked the Kansas poem," he said, "so why not see what you think of this one?"

Ehrengraf read the poem. It seemed to be about birds, and included the line 'Puppets dance from bloody strings.' Ehrengraf wasn't sure what the poem meant but he knew he liked the sound of that line.

"It's very good," he said.

"Yeah, I thought you'd like it. And I wrote it in the jug, just wrote the words down like they were flowing out of a faucet, and now all I can write is checks. It's ironic, isn't it?"

"It certainly is."

It was a little over two weeks later when Ehrengraf met William Telliford again. The meeting took place in the jail cell where the two had first made each other's acquaintance.

"Mr. Ehrengraf," the young man said. "Gee, I didn't know if you would show up. I figured you'd wash your hands of me."

"Why should I do that, sir?"

"Because they say I killed Robin. But I swear I didn't do it!"

"Of course you didn't."

"I could have killed Jan, for all I knew. Because I was unconscious at the time, or in a blackout, or whatever it was. So I didn't know what happened. But I was away from the apartment when Robin was killed and I was awake. I hadn't even been drinking much."

"We'll simply prove where you were."

Telliford shook his head. "What we can't prove is that Robin was alive when I left the apartment. I know she was, but how are we going to prove it?"

"We'll find a way," Ehrengraf said soothingly. "We know you're innocent, don't we?"

"Right."

"Then there is nothing to worry about. Someone else must have gone to your house, taking that fire ax along for the express purpose of framing you for murder. Someone jealous of your success, perhaps. Someone who begrudged you your happiness."

"But who?"

"Leave that to me, sir. It's my job."

"Your job," Telliford said. "Well, this time you'll get well paid for

your job, Mr. Ehrengraf. And your system is perfect for my case, let me tell you."

"How do you mean?"

"If I'm found innocent, I'll inherit all the money Robin inherited from her father. She made me her beneficiary. So I'll be able to pay you whatever you ask — eighty thousand dollars or even more."

"Eighty thousand will be satisfactory."

"And I'll pay it with pleasure. But if I'm found guilty — well, I won't get a dime."

"Because one cannot legally profit from a crime."

"Right. So if you'll take the case on your usual terms—"

"I work on no other terms," Ehrengraf said. "And I would trust no one else with your case." He took a deep breath and held it in his lungs for a moment before continuing. "Mr. Telliford," he said, "your case is going to be a difficult one. You must appreciate that."

"I do."

"Of course I'll do everything in my power on your behalf, acting always in your best interest. But you must recognize that the possibility exists that you will be convicted."

"And for a crime I didn't commit."

"Such miscarriages of justice do occasionally come to pass. It's tragic, I agree, but don't despair. Even if you're convicted, the appeal process is an exhaustive one. We can appeal your case again and again. You may have to serve some time in prison, Mr. Telliford, but there's always hope. And you know what Lovelace had to say on the subject."

"Lovelace?"

"Richard Lovelace. Born 1618, died 1658. *To Althea from Prison,* Mr. Telliford.

> " 'Stone walls do not a prison make,
> Nor iron bars a cage;
> Minds innocent and quiet take
> That for an hermitage;
> If I have freedom in my love
> And in my soul am free,
> Angels alone, that soar above,
> Enjoy such liberty.' "

Telliford shuddered. "Stone walls and iron bars," he said.

"Have faith, sir."

"I'll try."

"At least you have your poetry. Are you sufficiently supplied with paper and pencil? I'll make sure your needs are seen to."

“Maybe it would help me to write some poetry. Maybe it would take my mind off things.”

“Perhaps it would. And I’ll devote myself wholeheartedly to your defense, sir, whether I ever see a penny for my troubles or not.” He drew himself up to his full height. “After all,” he said, “it’s my obligation. I could not love thee, dear, so much, loved I not Honour more.’ That’s also Lovelace, Mr. Telliford. To Lucasta, Going to the Wars.’ Good day, Mr. Telliford. You have nothing to worry about.”

Detectiverse

Worthy of His Hire by *Horace Bull* [8]

Higgledy piggledy
Martin H. Ehrengrafs
Clients prove innocent
Time after time;

He must establish this
Criminologically
Or they pay nothing — which
Would be a crime.

The Piper Caper
by *William Bankier* [9]

A new short story by William Bankier

Meet one of the earliest "investigators of mysterious events, usually of a criminal nature"... a charming story — and if we say another word, your pleasure will be diluted...

❖

In Hamelin Town, in Brunswick, by famous Hanover City, on the banks of the river Weser, it was another grim day at City Hall. The Mayor and the Corporation were sitting around in their ceremonial robes looking and feeling guilty, and rightly so.

"I blame you," one of the Corporation said to the Mayor. "All he wanted was one thousand guilders to get rid of the rats. So we make a deal, he delivers, and then you try to offer him fifty."

"Easy to be wise after the fact," the Mayor said. "But I had to consider the safety of this administration. If we'd given that long tall drink of water the thousand, there'd have been nothing left in the kitty to meet the town payroll. So we'd have our semi-annual outcry, then in come the auditors after which you and I, gentlemen, would have to find new jobs."

Nobody had an answer to this, so silence came in through the open windows and filled the chamber. It was a heavy silence in Hamelin these days with the kids all gone. The Mayor tongued his back teeth for a while and then said, "I admit we're in deep trouble. Remember when the people came in a body to see us after the rats got out of hand? Remember what they said to us?"

One of the Corporation closed his eyes and intoned, "To think we buy gowns lined with ermine for dolts that can't or won't determine what's best to rid us of our vermin."

"Right," the Mayor said. "So you can imagine how poetic they'll be when we run for re-election."

They were thinking of adjourning the meeting in despair when they heard a sound of footsteps in the hall followed by a sharp rap at the chamber door. The Corporation shaped themselves up into a circle of reasonably alert figures around the table and the Mayor said, "Come in!"

The man who opened the door and entered the room was bent almost double and walked with the aid of a stick. His eyes were heavy-lidded and his cheeks and chin were covered with an unkempt gray beard. The Corporation detested him on sight because he was a walking advertisement for the only future they could anticipate.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Mr. Mayor," the old man said, "I have heard of the calamity that has overtaken your town. And I have come to bail you out. For a price."

"What are you talking about? Who are you?"

"I am an investigator of mysterious events, usually of a criminal nature. I sell my services to individuals and to groups for a fee. In effect, you may hire my eyes — privately."

"Never heard of such a thing. We have a sheriff who deals with crime."

"I am the only one in my profession at this time," the stranger said. "Some day I expect there will be many."

A Corporation member said, "You claim you can help us? How?"

"By solving the mystery of this fellow who calls himself the Pied Piper."

"What mystery? It's all perfectly clear. He came and played the flute and all the rats followed him and drowned in the river. Then he led the children away and into a cavern that opened in the side of Koppelberg Hill."

"I know all that," the old man said. He squinted at the Mayor. "By the way, I shall require payment in advance."

"Payment? How much, and what for? My colleague is right. There is no mystery to be solved; the Piper did what he did."

"My fee is ten guilders a day, plus expenses." He held out a cupped hand at the end of a remarkably long arm.

"It's little enough," the Mayor said, and the Treasurer took ten guilders from petty cash.

With the money in his purse, the stranger said, "You say this Piper did what he did. But did he? I find the whole story unbelievable and I would say, gentlemen, that you have been conned."

"Conned?"

"Had a confidence trick played on you. Been fooled, duped, gulled. I mean a man walks along your High Street playing a piccolo or whatever and gets a lot of wild rats to follow him? And then he does the same thing and all the children come storming out and march after him into the side of a mountain? I don't believe a word of it."

"When you say it like that, it does sound absurd," the Mayor admitted.

"Patently. So let's try to put together a more acceptable

hypothesis." The old man lowered his crooked body onto a vacant chair and balanced both hands on the end of his stick. With his grizzled chin hovering above his fists he said, "First the rats. My guess is they were not wild rats at all. They were trained by this trickster — possibly a man with some circus experience — trained to come running in answer to a particular series of notes on the flute or whatever. He brought them here and released them from cages. Then, after they had made pests of themselves, it was easy for him to lure them away."

One of the Corporation said, "But there were so many of them. They fought the dogs, and killed the cats, and bit the babies in the cradles, and ate the cheeses out of the vats, and licked the soup from the cook's own ladles, split open the—"

"I know, I know," said the stranger. "I put all that down to hysterical exaggeration."

"True," said the Mayor. "I myself never saw more than half a dozen rats at one time. Go on."

"So we come to the disappearing children. He could not have trained them to respond to his music the way the rats did. So he could only have enlisted their cooperation."

"What do you mean?"

"My theory is this: he sat down with a few of the older boys and girls, the leaders, and he explained to them that he had a place — a deserted house perhaps — where they could go and dance and eat and stay up late — do all the things you good people forbid them to do at home. A place without lessons, without parental authority. All they had to do was pretend they were under a spell and follow him. Naturally they agreed."

A thoughtful silence ensued. Then the Treasurer said, "But what about the opening in the hill? How did he manage that?"

The old man smiled behind his beard. "Think a minute. Who saw the hill open and the children march inside? The lame boy who was left behind. His testimony was accepted. But I smell an accomplice."

"Then let's find the boy," the Mayor thundered, "and question him."

"My idea precisely," said the stranger. "That's why I took the trouble of bringing him with me. If one of you will open the door—"

With the boy in the room, balancing on his home-made crutch, the inquisition began. It did not last long. At first the lad was silent but soon, with tears in his eyes and head hanging, he confessed that the Pied Piper had paid him to tell the story of the cavern opening and closing in Koppelberg Hill. In actual fact, the party marched into a wooded area beyond the town and boarded a number of horse-drawn wagons. Where they went then, he had no idea.

The chamber was now a babble of sound. The children were not gone forever! They had been spirited away, kidnaped by a vindictive scoundrel and a very bad flute player. Their hiding place had only to be located for the story to end happily.

"We'll organize a search party," the Treasurer said. "They can't have gone far."

"One moment," said the old man. "I suggest you leave this to me. No telling what might happen if you go blundering about. He has your children, after all."

"He's right," the Mayor said. "So far he's figured out the scheme very well. Let the stranger continue."

"Thank you. I'll take the lame boy with me and we'll start from where he saw them last."

They left the chamber together, two misshapen figures, old and young, crutch and walking stick scraping the boards of floor and stairs. When they were gone, the Mayor said, "Quite good value, that. Only ten guilders for the day and he's practically solved the case already."

"Ten plus expenses," the Treasurer said. "I'll have a close look at his meal vouchers in case he tries to feed the boy."

Impressed with the stranger's uncanny wisdom, the Corporation members were further surprised when he reported back that afternoon. The meeting had to be reconvened and when the Mayor gaveled for order at four o'clock, they faced an old man with a grim countenance. He seemed unable to speak.

"Did you find them?" prompted the Mayor.

"Yes."

"Then where are they?"

"I have sworn not to tell. And for the safety of the children I will not break my oath."

"But what—?"

"Let me tell you, this Pied Piper is a more devious and dangerous character than you have any idea. He has taken your children, not to the pleasure garden he promised, but to a large deserted building some miles from here. There he and a colleague have bound them all hand and foot. And now he threatens to set fire to the building and burn them all to death!"

Cries of fear and anger filled the chamber. The Mayor shouted above the clamor. "But why? Is he insane?"

"Not at all. He is a clear-eyed businessman with his mind set on profit. He said to tell you this, that you would understand."

The Mayor shook off the insult. "Where is the profit in such a mad scheme?"

"You must hand me fifteen hundred guilders — the original sum

agreed upon plus half. I will deliver it to the hideaway and, on receipt of the ransom, the Pied Piper will release the children."

"But this is an outrage," the Mayor said. "Mass kidnaping, making victims of an entire society — I've never heard of such a thing!"

"Nor have I," said the stranger. Then he added quietly, "But now that it has been perpetrated once, I suspect the world will hear of it again."

There was a brief but heated discussion. Then the decision was taken that the money should be paid. Hamelin had suffered enough — they wanted peace and quiet, they wanted conditions back to normal.

So the old stranger took the purse containing 1500 guilders and left the town by way of the road past Koppelberg Hill. It was as he entered the wooded area beyond the town that he straightened up, threw away his stick, and began walking with a vigorous stride, tearing off the false gray beard as he went. The lame boy met him in a clearing.

"Did you get the money?"

"Yes, indeed. Have you the package I left with you?"

The boy handed over a parcel; the man unwrapped it and took out a long coat, half of yellow and half of red. He put this on, saying, "I was getting tired of looking drab." The parcel also contained a yellow and red scarf with a flute attached to it. The Pied Piper slung this around his neck, and holding the instrument to his lips, blew a cascade of notes.

The lame boy did an awkward, crab-like pirouette. "Your playing is pure magic," he said, and they both laughed. Then the lad asked, "Where will you go now?"

"Down the road," the Piper said simply. "And I think you'd better come with me."

The boy's eyes lit up. "Could I?"

"You must. You were the Piper's accomplice. It would go badly for you back in Hamelin after this."

"Let's go then." But the boy paused. "What about the children? How will you get them to go home?"

"We'll stop first at the old house. They've had their fill of partying by now I expect. Besides, I'll tell them I'm sending in no more food. When the goodies run out, they'll go home. They've nowhere else to go."

Then they made off together, the tall musician adjusting his pace to that of the crippled boy. At the edge of the wood the Pied Piper picked up the boy, held him against one shoulder, and they covered the ground swiftly. "It grieves me," the Piper said, "that the problem of your leg is beyond my money and my wits. We live in the wrong time for that sort of magic."

“I don’t mind it so much now,” the boy said, “if I’m to be allowed to travel with you.”

That night they slept at an inn. They shared a bed in one of the finer rooms, for the piper had money with which to pay. When the boy awoke in the dark, crying because he had dreamed of huge hairy creatures with angry eyes and hungry mouths, his new friend comforted him. “The rats in Hamelin were the Mayor and his cronies. You’re free of them now. You and I are going on to have fun and new adventures.”

Then the Pied Piper took up his flute and played very softly until the boy fell asleep.

A Matter of Irrelevance
by *Isaac Asimov* [10]

A new Black Widowers story by Isaac Asimov

The Black Widowers grill a high-school principal with one of the most interesting postprandial problems ever presented to this remarkable club and to its discreet and unobtrusive waiter, Henry the Infallible. Who said the art of conversation was dead? Not when it involves juvenile delinquency, a letter containing an impenetrable (except to Henry) message, and a $5 grudge bet...

❖

"I think," said Mario Gonzalo, "that I know Henry's secret — how he gets the answer when we don't." He nodded in the direction of the waiter, who was quietly serving the drinks that were prelude to the monthly banquet of the Black Widowers.

James Drake stubbed out his cigarette and said, "I've known it all along. He's smarter than we are."

"Sure," said Gonzalo, flicking tobacco ash from the sleeve of his velvet jacket and helping himself to some Brie on a cracker; "but being smarter isn't enough."

"Being dumber isn't enough, either," broke in Emmanuel Rubin, glowering through his thick-lensed glasses, "so what good will the secret do you, Mario?"

"Being really dumb," said Gonzalo coolly, "is to be afraid to listen for fear of learning something. So I suppose you're not interested, Manny."

"What, and miss a good laugh?" said Rubin. "Go ahead, Mario."

Geoffrey Avalon, having accepted his drink from Henry, approached and said, "A good laugh about what?"

"About Mario's idea as to how Henry manages to come up with solutions," said Rubin. "Henry, you can listen, too. Mario knows your secret."

Henry smiled discreetly. "I have made no secret of what I do. The gentlemen of the Black Widowers analyze the problems carefully, remove all the useless adornments, and leave a plain picture for me to describe."

"Not at all," said Gonzalo, "not at all. You must say that to throw

us off. The secret is — irrelevance!"

There was a short pause. Then Rubin's scanty beard bristled and he said in high-pitched disbelief, "Is *that* what I'm supposed to listen to so that I can learn something?"

"Sure," said Gonzalo. "We're all of us reasoning men — even you sometimes, Manny — and we try to solve any little puzzle presented to us by catching at all the relevant angles. But if it were the relevant matters that mattered, so to speak, there'd be no puzzle. Anyone would then see the answer. It's Henry's trick of seeing the irrelevant that gives him the answer."

Drake said, "This is a contradiction in terms, Mario. Something that is irrelevant has nothing to do—"

Gonzalo interposed patiently, "Something that *seems* irrelevant but isn't. We see that it seems irrelevant; Henry sees that it really isn't irrelevant. Right, Henry?"

Henry's unlined face showed no expression beyond a general benevolence. "It is certainly an interesting suggestion," he said.

Avalon drew his formidable eyebrows together. "It is surely more than that, Mario. Henry sees what we do not, because he looks clearly at life while the rest of us do not have his direct and simple honesty and are not capable of doing so. Even if you were to see what Henry does, you would not get the answer."

Gonzalo said, "I bet I can. Five dollars says that if there's a puzzle today, I'll use Henry's technique and get the answer before he does."

"You're on," said Rubin at once.

"Good," said Mario. "Jeff, you hold the stakes. But remember, no bet if there's no problem."

Drake said, "Oh, there'll be a problem. Personally, I think we're each of us deliberately choosing our guests just for their problems."

"And yet perhaps not this time," said Avalon, "since the guest has not arrived — nor tonight's host, either, unless the steps on the stairs — No, it's Tom."

Thomas Trumbull's white and crisply waved hair made its appearance, followed quickly by the rest of his body as he mounted the stairs.

He said, "If you're worried about the host's whereabouts, Jeff, Roger Halsted's just arrived downstairs with a stranger who, I presume, is our guest for tonight. I raced ahead since I am a dying man who needs a dr— Ah, thank you, Henry."

Gonzalo had taken his seat next to Halsted, and spreading out his napkin with a practiced flick, said, "We almost thought we would have to start without a host or guest, Roger. What happened? Decided you couldn't stand the expense?"

Halsted reddened and his mild stutter seemed a shade more pronounced. “Not my fault really. Burry was delayed — Dan Burry, my guest. His phone rang just as I was picking him up and he grew very upset. I couldn’t very well press him too hard and urge him to hang up. For a while, in fact, I thought I’d have to leave without him.”

“What was it about, do you know? The phone call, I mean.”

Halsted looked in the direction of his guest. “I don’t know. Something involving one of his students. He’s a school principal, you know.”

“Your school?”

“No, but why don’t you save your questions for the grilling?”

“Do you mind letting me start it?”

“Not at all,” and Halsted turned his attention to the crabmeat soup.

Dan Burry was a rather large man with dark hair as crisply waved as Trumbull’s and with a brief mustache of the kind Adolf Hitler had put out of fashion for at least a generation. His jowled face bore a worried look and he tackled his roast duck with an enthusiasm dulled by absence of mind.

He did not participate in the general conversation and seemed to listen only distantly as Rubin and Drake debated the respective value of nuclear fusion and solar power as the ultimate energy source.

He seemed unprepared, therefore, for the suddenness with which the focus of attention suddenly shifted. While Henry freshened the coffee and produced brandy, Gonzalo said, “Mr. Burry, how do you justify your existence?”

Burry looked at Gonzalo with what seemed a momentary flash of indignation but then muttered in a depressed sort of way, “Ah, yes, Roger warned me that there would be a question-and-answer period.”

“Yes,” said Gonzalo, “and in return for the dinner you are expected to answer frankly and fully, under terms of strict confidentiality, of course. So — how do you justify your existence?”

Burry said, “I try to maintain the kind of atmosphere and organization at a city high school in which at least some of the student body can gain an education and a respect for learning. That is justification enough, I think, whenever I succeed.”

“Do you succeed often?”

“Not often.”

Avalon cleared his throat. “The education of the young of any species begins with discipline.”

“Those who believe so,” said Burry, “all too frequently believe it ends with discipline, too, and confuse the purpose of a school with the purpose of a prison.”

Gonzalo said, “I understand that just as you were leaving for dinner tonight you received an unsettling phone call. Did that involve school business?”

Burry cast a hard glance in Halsted’s direction. Halsted reddened and said, “I was explaining why we were late, Dan.”

Gonzalo said, “What was the phone call about?”

Burry shook his head. “It is not something I should discuss. It is an unfortunate matter that involves a minor.”

“A minor what?”

“I’m using the word as a noun, Mr. Gonzalo, not as an adjective. It involves a human being who is only seventeen.”

Gonzalo said, “We understand your reluctance to discuss the matter, but I assure you, the fact that a minor is involved is irrelevant.” He paused and seemed to savor the word for a moment. “The terms of the dinner are that you answer our questions. Roger should have explained that to you.”

“May I stress again,” interrupted Avalon, “the confidentiality of our proceedings.”

“Including the waiter,” said Trumbull, scowling, “who is a valued member of this group.”

Burry glanced briefly at Henry, who had now taken up his post at the sideboard with his usual look of quiet attention, and said, “I won’t deny, gentlemen, that I’d welcome a discussion of the matter, for I’m very frustrated over it. Still, I cannot use the name of the young man. Will it suit the rules of your club if I refer to him only as John?”

Rubin said, “It’s our experience, Mr. Burry, that that kind of subterfuge always fails. You’ll slip and use his real name.”

“John is his real given name, Mr. Rubin, and is as nearly anonymous as a given name can be. I will merely refrain from using his last name.”

Halsted said, “I think we can allow that.”

Burry said, “Let me tell you about John first. He’s a good-looking young man, a bit undersized but keen, quick, and intelligent. His intelligence attracted the attention of his teachers at once and I, of course, am always on the lookout for such students. All students are, in theory, of equal importance and all deserve the best education we can give them, but the unusually bright ones are, of course, our special delight and, too often, our special heartbreak.”

“Why heartbreak?” asked Gonzalo quickly.

“Because very often a bright child is as much the victim of his social handcuffs as he would be if he had not a brain in his head. It’s a mistake to think that intelligence alone can lift you out of the mud, and there is no use in citing examples to the contrary. It may happen, given special circumstances; in most cases, it does not happen.”

“I presume,” said Rubin sardonically, “John is a child of the ghetto — as was my father in his time.”

Burry said in a deliberate and even tone, “John is a child of the ghetto, but not as your father was, Mr. Rubin. Your father and you can, if you are circumspect, hide your origin. You may change your name, be careful with your speech, abandon your idiosyn-cracies, and you might pass. It would take a special law to pin an identifying badge on you. John and others like him, however, are born with the identifying badge, and long before you can know them as individuals you recognize them as Blacks.”

Rubin looked uncomfortable. “I meant no offense.”

“None taken. Some Blacks do need identification, I might say. By the convention of our society a single Black ancestor makes one Black. A man might therefore be apparently White but socially Black. Take myself. I am Black.”

“That makes no difference to us, sir,” said Avalon austerely.

“Why should it?” said Burry. “Nor does it seem to make a difference to some of the students. One prominent non-obscene graffito in the fourth-floor toilet reads, ‘Burry is five-fourths white.’ Just the same, my one ancestor does make a difference in my attitude toward John.

“I’m desperate to give a youngster like that the kind of chance he might have if he looked like me. In the gathering crisis of our times the human species cannot afford to waste brains, and this one may be wasted.”

“Drugs?” asked Trumbull.

Burry shrugged. “Pot, of course. That’s a rite of passage with kids these days — like a corncob pipe was to Tom Sawyer, or to Mark Twain for that matter. And then for all the talk about the damage done by marijuana, the evidence is not as strong as for the damage done by tobacco, yet not only is tobacco smoking legal and socially acceptable, but the government subsidizes the tobacco growers.”

“You start with pot and you go on to heroin,” said Avalon dryly. “Another rite of passage.”

“Sometimes — especially if you make both equally illegal, so that the pot smoker fails to see much difference — but only sometimes. One can go from social drinking to alcoholism, a condition as dangerous as heroin and far more common, yet society does not for that reason condemn or outlaw social drinking.

“In any case,” Burry went on, “John is not deeply involved in pot and does not have the makings of a heroin addict. No, I’m afraid John’s temptations lie in another direction — crime.”

Avalon said, “What kind of crime, Mr. Burry?”

“Nothing exceedingly dramatic. I suspected him of being a purse

snatcher, a shoplifter, a petty thief. It was only a suspicion, until tonight. Now, I'm afraid, it's a certainty."

"Is that what the phone call was about?" asked Gonzalo.

"It was about John," said Burry despondently. "It was, indeed, from him. He is in trouble and he turned to me. There is some small satisfaction in that. I managed to obtain a lawyer for him and I promised to supply reasonable bail, if necessary. It was that which delayed our arrival. And yet I can take only minimal satisfaction from being of help now. I suspect I failed him to begin with."

"In what way?" asked Gonzalo.

"If I had been more ingenious, I might have persuaded him to cooperate with the police."

"Not much chance of that, Dan," said Halsted. "Anyone who's a schoolteacher knows that in the bright lexicon of youth there is no such word as 'squeal.' The guys who keep their mouths shut go to jail, but they are heroes to their peers and are taken care of. The squealers may stay out of jail but they're ostracized and very likely beaten up."

"I know that, Roger," said Burry. "I need no education in the mores of the street, but I might have done it if I were smart enough. I'll see him tonight after this meal — if you won't mind my leaving by ten thirty at the latest — and if he'll cooperate, I'll get him out of the city. There are agencies who will help in this respect and I've used them before. These people we're after won't mount an inter-city hunt for him. It isn't the Syndicate we're talking about."

Avalon twiddled his empty brandy glass and said, "What we talking about, Mr. Burry?"

"A burglary ring organized by medium-sized racketeers who employ high-school students as their field operatives. The kids bring in their takings and receive a percentage for their trouble. It saves them the trouble of trying to peddle the goods themselves — but if they hold out for their own profit and are caught, they are beaten up."

Trumbull said, "It sounds very much like a Fagin operation."

"It's *exactly* a Fagin operation," said Burry. "You don't suppose the practice died out with Oliver Twist, do you?"

"And you're after Fagin himself, I take it," said Trumbull.

Burry said, "It certainly does no good to pick up the kids. They're eventually let go and the game goes on. Even if they were not let go, replacements are easily obtained and the game still goes on. You've got to get the corrupters themselves. And beyond that," he added sadly, "the quirks in our society that make such things possible."

"If you can cure those quirks," said Avalon, "you will have achieved a first for our ten thousand years of so-called civilization."

"Then at least the corrupters," said Burry. "If I were smart enough to see my way into persuading John to go in with me—"

Gonzalo interrupted. “That’s twice now you’ve said you needed to be smart enough. Why smart enough? Persuasive enough, I can see; eloquent enough; unscrupulous enough; threatening enough. Why smart enough?”

Burry hesitated and rubbed his chin, as though wondering what to say. He decided apparently, and said, “The police have been after the burglary ring and, among others, they have consulted me. They had reason to think that some of the students at my school were involved and they wanted me to cooperate with them in finding the culprits. To be truthful, I wasn’t anxious to do this.”

“To squeal?” said Drake, stony-faced.

For a moment Burry stiffened with indignation. Then he relaxed. “You’re right. I don’t want to squeal, but that’s just a gut reaction. There’s more to it than that. As I told you, picking up the youngsters does not solve the problem, but it may manufacture hardened criminals. Were I to find some youngster I suspected of being involved, what I would hope to do would be to obtain the necessary information from him and turn over the information, not the youngster, to the police.”

Avalon said, “I don’t think you would get the necessary information by kindly persuasion, Mr. Burry. The police might have better arguments than you have.”

Trumbull slapped the table with the palm of his hand. “Jeff, that’s silly. Those kids are heroes if they resist the police and if any police officer tried to beat anything out of them, not only is any information he gets inadmissible as evidence, the policeman involved will be up on charges.”

“I call that hobbling the police to the cost of the honest citizen,” said Avalon.

“I call it forcing the police to a single standard of conduct and having them treat the poor, the ill-educated, the unpopular as circumspectly as they would treat those with money and lawyers,” said Trumbull.

“Why not enforce the single standard by treating the well-to-do criminal as roughly as the poor ones, then?” demanded Avalon.

Trumbull said, “Because they’re only *suspected* criminals. The state of actual criminality comes only after trial and judgment and until then the person in custody has all the rights and privileges of a free American, including decent treatment at the hands of the guardians of the very law that says so. Mr. Burry, I think your attitude is a good one.”

Burry said, “Thank you, but good or not, it didn’t work. What the police need is evidence. They have suspicions as to the identity of the ringleaders, the Fagins, but until they can catch them in action,

surrounded by their stolen goods, they aren't likely to be able to prove it. One of the difficulties appears to be that the criminals change their base of operation frequently, and are never in one place long enough to leave a clear trail. Of course, if we knew in advance where they would be, we would have a chance. And that is the kind of information the youngsters would have, for they have to know where to bring the loot.

"Without that— Well, the poorer sections of New York are an incredible rabbit warren which could swallow up an army of police searchers who would encounter frozen-faced inhabitants denying all knowledge of anything. From the pattern of the robberies, the police suspect that the scene of operations must be on Manhattan's west side, somewhere between 80th Street and 125th Street; but that's not much of a hint. — But I had my eye on John."

"Why him?" asked Drake.

"Money," snapped Burry. "It comes to that. We live in a society that measures all values by money, and that delivers unending pressures by advertising in every medium urging the possession of material things that can be had only for money. Sex standards are set by the beautiful people, and those can be met only with money. Well, then, if you don't have money, what do you do? Devote your life to gaining those skills that will make money in the end. What if you firmly believe that the disadvantages you were born with will make it impossible for you to make money even if you gain those skills? You give up, perhaps, and get the money by the shortest route — and another youngster is lost both to himself and society."

Drake said, "Yes, but this is true for many of the students at the school, I'm sure. Why John?"

"Of course, it's true of many. That's why the youngsters are so easily recruited. But I have been interested in John so that my eye has been on him and in recent months he has shown money."

"In what way?" asked Rubin, who had been absently doodling dollar signs on his napkin.

"Better clothes, for one thing; an air of self-confidence for another. Something amounting almost to arrogance in his attitude toward girls. There's no point in having money if you don't show it, and I know the signs. I had no proof, of course, no real evidence, and I didn't want to confront John with my suspicions if, by any chance, I happened to be wrong.

"Then last Monday I passed him in the hall, quite by accident, and he had a piece of paper in his hand. It seemed to me it had been handed to him. I had not been looking in his direction; it had been an impression out of the corner of my eye. I certainly didn't see who had done the passing, for it was between periods and the halls were quite

crowded. It's good to be in the halls at unpredictable times, by the way. The possible presence of authority does impose some sense of discipline, however minimal." Burry sighed, and smiled rather weakly.

Gonzalo said, "What about the paper?"

"I had no reason to think the paper had anything to do with the robberies, but it seemed unusual, and I have learned to respond at once to anything unusual. 'What's that paper you're holding, John?' I asked in what I hoped was a friendly tone.

" 'The paper, Mr. Burry?' he asked, and my suspicions were aroused at once. To repeat a question is almost invariably a play for time. So I asked to see it; I held out my hand for it. By now the main flood of students had passed, though some turned for a quick look backward."

Trumbull said, "Could you force him to hand over the paper? He has a right to his personal property, hasn't he?"

Burry said, "I would not have used force, naturally, but within the school my powers to enforce discipline are, in theory, considerable. I might have suspended him from his classes for failure to comply and that would have been an unhappy position for John. He enjoyed his classes. In any case, he complied.

"He hesitated, said, 'It's just a piece of paper I picked up, Mr. Burry,' glanced at it carelessly and handed it over, saying with an air of mocking virtue, 'I was going to put it in a waste basket, Mr. Burry. You wouldn't want the halls all littered.'

"I resisted the temptation to point out that one more piece of paper would have made no difference in the extent of litter and said, 'I am pleased at your thoughtfulness. I'll see to it that this is thrown away,' and put it in my pocket without looking at it. I then asked him how he was doing with his schoolwork and he answered easily enough. He seemed in no way perturbed at my having the paper in my possession. I waited till I was back in my office before I looked at it and I must say I was disappointed. It was a typewritten sheet, Xeroxed, not very professionally done, and it urged students to demand decent educational facilities, a message I wholeheartedly agree with.

"But there was nothing conspiratorial about it — or at least I could see nothing as conspiratorial. I didn't trust my own judgment in the matter, so I called the detective lieutenant who had approached me on the matter of the burglary ring. He visited me after hours, in plain clothes, of course, and I showed him the letter without telling him the name of the youngster from whom I had obtained it."

Trumbull said, "Surely he asked the name?"

Burry said, "I told the story in such a way that no one youngster of whatever name was implicated."

Trumbull who, as a cryptographer by profession, might have been particularly interested, said, “By withholding information you may have deprived the lieutenant of crucial clues in the understanding of the message.”

“He didn’t think so,” said Burry. “He laughed and told me it was nonsense. I think he would have torn it up if I hadn’t rescued it — perhaps out of disappointment, for when I called him, I may have given him the impression I had something. I’ve kept studying the paper myself the last few days. Heaven help me, I even tried warming it over a hot plate in case invisible ink showed up.

“Now it is too late. Young John was arrested in what must have been the central clearing place — caught in clear guilt, with identifiable stolen goods in his possession. John called me from the police station — that was the phone call. And I’ve spoken to my detective-friend. But if I had been clever enough to understand the letter, I might have stopped John.”

Avalon said, “*If* the letter had significance. Not every piece of innocent literature conceals a guilty secret.”

“This one does, though,” said Rubin, his eyes flashing, his voice strident. “Let me ask you a few questions, Mr. Burry. You say *John* was taken. You mentioned no one else, not even by inference. Was he alone?”

“It’s my understanding he was.”

“And had John been holding the paper for some indefinite period when you became aware of it, or had he just received it?”

“I can’t answer that question definitely, Mr. Rubin,” said Burry, “but it was my impression that it had been passed to him even as I watched. I wish I had seen who it was that passed it, but I didn’t.”

Rubin said triumphantly, “Then the passer was there and watched you ask John to hand over the paper and watched him do so. The passer turned that information over to the higher-ups of the burglary ring and they had to take into account the possibility that John might talk. If the letter gave some sort of information that told John where to take the stolen goods, that information was quickly changed. John, being no longer trustworthy, would not be told of the change and he would walk in alone to the meeting place that was no longer to be a meeting place and was captured.”

Trumbull said, “Wait. Hold on. How did the police know about the meeting place, old or new?”

Burry studied his fingers and said, “According to my detective-friend, to whom I also talked before coming here, John had been under quiet surveillance for some time. Through nothing *I* said,” he added hurriedly. “He had been identified at the scene of a burglary. Not with certainty, you understand, but they were keeping an eye on

him. I hadn't known that."

Trumbull said, "Then if you hadn't taken that paper and roused suspicion — assuming Manny Rubin's notion is correct — John would have led the police to an active clearing house, and right to some of the controlling figures."

Burry nodded. "That thought has occurred to me."

Gonzalo said hotly, "How the devil could Mr. Burry know that, Tom?"

"I'm returning to an earlier point," said Trumbull. "Our guest showed the letter to the detective and it was ignored. He did *not* mention the name of the young man involved and I said that might be vital evidence. I was right. If the detective had known it was taken from a young man who was under surveillance, he would have treated it much more seriously."

"You're right," said Burry. "I'll have to tell them now."

"Wait," said Gonzalo. "I have a better idea. Why not tell them what the letter means? If you could be of help to them, they might be willing to go a bit easier on John if you asked them to."

"John," rumbled Avalon, "may think he's been double-crossed already. He may think the burglary ring deliberately let him walk into a trap to pay him back for handing over the piece of paper. He may be willing to cooperate now."

"The catch is," said Burry, "that I don't know what the letter means, so I can't use it either to win consideration from the police or cooperation from John."

Gonzalo said eagerly, "Do you remember what the letter said, Mr. Burry? Can you repeat it?"

"I don't have to," said Burry. "I have it with me."

He took it out, unfolded it, flattened it out, and passed it to Gonzalo. The letter made its way around the table and after it reached Drake, that gentleman passed it on to Henry, even as Burry's hand had reached out to take it. Henry glanced at it quickly, then returned it to Burry.

The typewriting did not have a professional touch, nor did the Xeroxing. It had an all-capital headline:

PROTEST NATIONAL DISCRIMINATION AGAINST NEW YORK.

Underneath it said, "Join the march on City Hall on October 20. Demand that Congress recognize the rights of the poor to a quality education. There is no disgrace in being a New Yorker. We are Americans, every bit as much Americans as the people of Tar Heel, North Carolina, and we want our rights as Americans. No more, but

certainly no less."

"Is that all?" said Avalon in astonishment.

"That's all," said Burry.

"What a remarkably foolish message," said Avalon. "Why march on City Hall? City Hall is helpless. What's more, no one is ever going to get much sympathy from small-town America by making fun of it. Tar Heel, North Carolina! I admit that 'tarheeler' is a nickname for a North Carolinian because of the early production of rosin and tar from pine trees in that state, but that kind of name only sounds well when used by those who are so-named. To make up a name like Tar Heel, North Carolina is a deliberate insult. It would be like having a Southerner refer to the town of Damyankee, Massachusetts. What do they hope to gain?"

"Nothing," said Rubin, smiling, "because it's not a call to action. I'll bet there isn't any march scheduled for October 20, is there, Mr. Burry?"

"I don't know," said Burry. "I haven't heard of one."

"Then it's a message, all right," said Rubin.

Burry said, "Where? I tried looking at initial letters, final letters, every other word, every third word. I can't find anything." Mario Gonzalo shook his head slowly and with a moderately insufferable air of superiority. "It couldn't possibly be any of those things, Mr. Burry. I could have told you that before I ever saw the letter."

There was a moment's complete silence and every other Black Widower turned to stare at Gonzalo. "Good God," said Drake, blinking through cigarette smoke, "he sounds like Sherlock Holmes."

Gonzalo said, "If you don't mind, there's five dollars riding on this, so just listen." He put aside the free-flowing caricature of Burry which he had drawn in the course of the discussion and said, "John got the message as Mr. Burry was watching, and he handed it over promptly. But he looked at it first, isn't that right Mr. Burry? Just a glance?"

Burry hesitated and said, "Yes, just a quick look."

"Exactly! If it was a message, he had to see what it was before he handed it over, and if a quick look was enough, then he had no time to match up first letters or last letters or skip words. And if we take just a glance at the letter we'll see what he saw."

Rubin said with elaborate politeness, "And would you kindly tell us what *you* see."

Gonzalo said, "I told you what to look for at the start of the evening. Look for the irrelevancy. Tar Heel, North Carolina is irrelevant. They could have made up the name of any other town — Jet Air, Utah, or Lollipop, South Dakota. Why insist on Tar Heel? Because it's the key. John took one quick look at the letter to see the

name of the town and once he had it, that was all he needed and he could give the paper away."

Avalon said thoughtfully, "Well, you know, there's something to that."

"Nothing much," said Rubin, "unless Mario can tell us what Tar Heel, North Carolina means?"

"It could be an anagram."

"Like what?"

Gonzalo said, "I've been working on one: 'Al, the not real corn hair.' "

There was a sticky silence, then Trumbull brought his fist down on the table. "Damn it, Mario, what does that mean?"

"I don't know. There could be other anagrams. Or it could be a cryptogram. Or there could be a book somewhere that has a list of word equivalents. Maybe it means, 'Cheese it, the cops.' I don't know. But it means something."

Rubin said, "That's a big help, telling us it means something."

Gonzalo said, in an aggrieved tone, "Then let's do some thinking. It won't hurt if we spend a few minutes trying to anagram it, or something, and maybe work out what it means."

The minutes passed in a dead silence and finally Burry looked at his watch and sighed. He said, "I really must get down to the police station. I suppose the letter is really meaningless."

"Well, now, Dan," said Halsted, stroking his hair back from his receding hairline, "we can't really say that till we've asked Henry."

"The waiter?"

"Why, yes. He has an uncommon knack for seeing the obvious. Except that I don't see *him.* Henry!"

Henry's head appeared as he climbed the stairs with a rapidity quite different from his usual gentle flow. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Halsted," he said, "I did not intend to be gone long. May I ask Mr. Burry a question?"

Burry had risen and was clearly on his way to the cloakroom. He said, "Well, yes, but nothing too complicated, I hope."

"Unless you said something about it during the brief interval in which I was absent, sir, I believe you did not mention the actual place — the address — at which the student was apprehended."

"No, I did not."

"Do you know the place?"

Burry sucked his lower lip inward and bit at it thoughtfully, "It was mentioned. Yes. But I don't think I remember it."

Henry said, "Was it, by any chance, 283 West 92nd Street?"

Burry stared at Henry for a moment, then sat down. "Yes, it was, now that you mention it. That was precisely the address. How did you

know?"

"It's in the letter, sir."

"Where?" said Avalon. "Show us where."

Henry said, "Mr. Gonzalo's reasoning seemed to me perfectly correct in every detail when he pointed out the irrelevance and, therefore, the importance of the town of Tar Heel, North Carolina. There seemed to be a general impression that it was a manufactured name, but it occurred to me that it might be a real one. There are very many peculiar names among the small towns in the United States; Tar Heel would be sedate and conservative, compared to some. And if it were real, it would have unmistakable significance. So I went down to look it up."

Avalon said, "You mean there *is* a Tar Heel, North Carolina?"

"There is, Mr. Avalon."

"And it's listed in the gazetteer?"

"It may be, but I tried another source. The all-inclusive recording of all the inhabited places in the United States large enough to include a post office is in a zipcode directory, and we have one downstairs. Tar Heel, North Carolina *is* included and, of course, so is its zipcode. The directory is the book Mr. Gonzalo referred to when he spoke of a list of word equivalents."

"I was thinking of phrases," said Gonzalo.

"It is numbers, but that's a mere detail. The number equivalent is, of course, unique. Tar Heel has a zipcode of 28392 and no other. And if the clearing house is on the upper west side, 283 West 92nd Street would seem the likely interpretation. Undoubtedly, there are ways of coding for the east side or west side, or if not all the numbers are used, as in 2 West 92nd, or if a named street such as Amsterdam Avenue is used. Still, the prevalence of numbered streets and avenues in Manhattan make a zipcode code, if I may use the phrase, particularly useful."

Burry said blankly, "How could I miss that?"

Drake grunted. "We always ask ourselves that after Henry sees whatever there is to see."

Burry said, "If I show this to the police, they'll see that the correspondence between the zipcode and the address *can't* be coincidence. And if they know that much, then they may learn more."

"If they concentrate on the letter," said Rubin, "they might learn something about the typewriter, the Xeroxing, and so on. And if you confront John with what you know and indicate that the gang will assume the information came from him, he might be willing to tell more. He can be in no worse trouble with them and he might improve his standing with the police."

Burry had his coat and hat on. "Thank you, all of you. Thank you,

Henry." He whirled out.

Avalon said, "Happy ending."

"Not for everyone," said Henry.

"What do you mean?"

Henry said, "Mr. Gonzalo clearly had the answer, all but the trivial final step. In my opinion, Mr. Rubin owes him five dollars."

Ellery Queen's Mystery Newsletter

Grime Dossier
by Otto Penzler[11]

HOLMES MOVIES: Is it possible to overpraise a wonderful book? By whipping out every conceivable superlative and heaping it on a single volume, is credibility strained? There are times when the risk must be taken. *The Films of Sherlock Holmes* (Citadel, $14.95) by Chris Steinbrunner and Norman Michaels requires one simply to use those words which reviews ought generally to avoid: brilliant, distinguished, magnificent, etc. To fail to use the words would do this volume an injustice. Here is the opening sentence: "The place is a room in Baker Street, somewhere on the edge of eternity." Can you doubt that you are in for a treat?

Meticulously researched and exquisitely, colorfully written by Steinbrunner, one of the country's foremost film scholars, and enhanced by hundreds of both familiar and very rare photographs tracked down by Michaels, the book is one of the few indispensable Holmesian books of the past several years. And, although it is said that comparisons are odious (well, there are some who say it), it is only fair to point out that *The Films of Sherlock Holmes* is not the only book on the subject. Last year Bramwell House published *Holmes of the Movies*, and the very first chapter provides fair warning of what lurks ahead. Holmes's address is given as 221 Baker Street (instead of 221B), Poe's landmark story is given the title "Murder in the Rue Morgue" (instead of "The Murders") and a character is described as "Edgar Allan Poe's Arsene Lupin" (whereas Poe created the detective, C. Auguste Dupin, and Maurice Leblanc invented the thief, Arsene Lupin). Beware!

If you like Sherlock Holmes, or movies, or mysteries, or just good books which provide hours of intelligent and literate fun, *The Films of Sherlock Holmes* is recommended as the book of the year.

A DANGEROUS THING: For anyone fortunate enough to live in San Francisco's Bay Area, several mystery courses are scheduled for the upcoming months. "Agatha Christie: Queen of Crime" will be taught at St. Mary's College, Moraga, California, in two day-long sessions in March. "Divine Mysteries" will feature clergyman sleuths, in the winter session at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley. And if you hurry you might still get into classes on "The International Detective" and "Women of Mvstery." All courses are taught by the same *femme fatale*, Janet Rudolph, who can be reached at (415) 548-5799.

OH, SHOOT: I have to admit that western fiction isn't my cup of

bovril. But the nice thing about having a prejudice is that you can retain the capacity for being surprised when something excellent refutes your negative expectations. *The* Ox-Bow *Incident* and *Night of the Hunter,* for example, are sort-of westerns that cannot fail to give pleasure. When a great storyteller goes to work, he can force you to turn pages in any genre. Edgar-winning Brian Garfield began his writing career with westerns before turning to mystery, crime, espionage, and suspense thrillers, and he has reverted with a charming big book called *Wild Times* (Simon & Schuster, $11.95). To prepare you for this splendid entertainment, you should know that it is a novel with the subtitle: "The True and Authentic Life of Col. Hugh Cardiff," the famous dime-novel hero. Told from Cardiff's point of view, the second sentence sets the tone: "I mean to set down an account... as straight as I can but you have to keep in mind that I used to have something of a reputation as a liar."

Bloody Visions
by Chris Steinbrunner [12]

All the festive excitement in the last few months over the fiftieth birthday of Walt Disney's beloved Mickey Mouse has tended to obscure the fact that — at least during much of his active comic-book career — Mickey was deeply involved in mystery and melodrama. His triumph over the dreaded shape known as the Phantom Blot has become a legendary metropolitan crime story, and the hulking, sinister Pegleg Pete appeared and reappeared across more than two decades (as the mouse's nemesis, each time at the helm of some new criminal venture) to establish himself as a classic childhood villain. Now Abbeville Press presents us with a huge, pictorial volume, *Walt Disney's Best Comics: Mickey Mouse* ($15.95), tracing the early years of the rodent's newspaper-strip appearances — first in mere gag situations, writer-illustrator Fred Gottfredson informs us, but after the first few months graduating to melodrama continuity.

And what razzle-dazzle continuity it is! The very first adventure, *Mickey in Death Valley* (1930), involves a lost will, a lost mine, and the epitome of a Depression crooked lawyer, Sylvester Shyster. Grin-faced Mickey breathlessly rushes on to open up a private detective agency ("Hot dog! Our first case! Our first clue!") to round up a gang of counterfeiters, saves a caliph's sacred jewel from infidels, campaigns against machine-gun wielding gangsters with his very own big-city newspaper, unmasks a coven of seven "ghosts" spooking an old manor house, flies his own tiny plane against air pirates, and is generally up to his ears in mystery doings. A companion volume of Donald Duck strips from the forties has similar thrills. For a children's hero Mickey is throughout surprisingly adult, always sensible in his assessment of people and situations, never-failingly cheerful, and a charmer. Now merely a bland amusement-park host and television king, we wish him one more tangle with the Phantom Blot.

A new feature film involving Sherlock Holmes is on the horizon, and from advance reports it is to be spectacular. *Murder by Decree* pits Holmes and Watson once more (as did *A Study in Terror)* against the most notorious real-life murderer of the 19th century, Jack the Ripper. The star of this Anglo-Canadian co-production filmed in London is Christopher Plummer, who was superb as the detective in the recent Learning Corporation of America half-hour adaptation of *The Silver Blaze* (also filmed in England, and intended for network television, but as yet unreleased). The supporting cast is first-rate as well, and quite intriguing: James Mason as Watson, David Hemmings as a police

inspector, Frank Finlay as Lestrade, Anthony Quayle as the Commissioner of Scotland Yard, Sir John Gielgud as the Prime Minister, as well as Genevieve Bujold, Donald Sutherland, and Susan Clark in other roles. A great deal of authenticity has gone into the swirling fog and squalor of East End London, as well the more elegant corners of the city. Young director Bob Clark, known previously for zippy modern terror films, and screenwriter John Hopkins insist they have retained the flavor of the plot and the two main characters, but with a difference. “This is a passionate and caring Holmes. The key was to develop a *real* Holmes and Watson, with motivations that you really cared about.”

As well, comedy team Peter Cook and Dudley Moore have done a new British version of one of the world’s best-known mystery novels, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* — as outrageous parody. Cook is a popinjay, Fagin-accented Holmes, and Moore’s Watson is so abysmally stupid he makes Nigel Bruce’s portrayal approach Einstein level. (Moore also plays Holmes’s tyrannical *mother,* who insists on calling her dismayed son “Sheri.”) However, throughout this travesty the bare bone of the famous story still surfaces; Terry Thomas is a surprisingly thoughtful Dr. Mortimer, and Joan Greenwood a bewitching (in more than one way) Beryl Stapleton. The moor sets are picture-postcard good. So far no American release has been announced, but given the current popularity of both Holmes and Moore, it probably will be. Beware this *Hound* — it’s a dog.

Interview: Lawrence Block

Lawrence Block is one of the rare practitioners of mystery fiction who manages to successfully combine humor with crime — arguably the most difficult type of mystery story to achieve. Most recently, he has written about two series characters — burglar Bernie Rhodenbarr for his novels (he is the title character of *Burglars Can't Be Choosers* and *Burglar in the Closet,* both Random House, $6.95) and Ehrengraf for his short stories.

EQMM: You have written a great number of books involving series characters. Why do you prefer to write about the same hero again and again?

BLOCK: Their worlds evolve as the books accumulate. If I like a character, I want to stay with him. Also it is due to a general failure of imagination. It's easier than dreaming up a new character for each book.

EQMM: It seems as if a large proportion of your series characters are crooks, or at least work outside the law. What is your attraction to the criminal mind?

BLOCK: Well, the characters are outsiders, certainly; they have that in common. When I conceived Matt Scudder, I first decided that I'd make him a member of the police force. Then I realized that I couldn't really be comfortable writing about somebody working within an organization. I also did a foreign intrigue type of series (seven books) about a character named Tanner who was also very much an outsider, who played a lone hand.

EQMM: Do you understand specifically what makes you return to this type of personality?

BLOCK: Beats me! I do believe it's possible that this is my way of dealing with that aspect of myself — by writing about it. When I wrote the first "Burglar" book I was at a very low point in my career. I was living in Hollywood, I was not writing, not making any money, and trying to figure out what to do. So I considered, with a certain degree of seriousness, burglary. It had several things to be said for it, several things in common with free-lance writing: it's equally uncertain, you set your own hours, you work alone, you avoid human contact. It was not without appeal to me. You get in and you get out. And the pay is much better, there's less haggling. I tried picking my own lock in the hotel, to learn various techniques. It's hard for me to know exactly how serious I was, but it seemed like a good idea at the time.

EQMM: What prevented you from actually putting your idea into practice?

BLOCK: Cowardice. It's much easier to write about violence than to go and have our bodies injured.

The Jury Box
by Jon L. Breen [13]

Of the giants of the British detective novel between the World Wars — such names as Christie, Sayers, Crofts, Berkeley, Allingham, and Blake — I believe only two remain: Michael Innes and Ngaio Marsh. Pessimists who thought the title of Dame Ngaio's 1977 novel, ***Last Ditch,*** was an indication that the New Zealand writer was abandoning the genre after forty-odd years were, they will be glad to know, gravely mistaken. Furthermore, the twenty-eighth novel about Chief Superintendent Roderick Alleyn shows him close to top form.

**** Ngaio Marsh: ***Grave Mistake,*** Little. Brown, $8.95. This is an English village mystery, with all the requisite characters from vicar to village idiot. Marsh's style has a mellow charm and wit; her characters are vividly drawn; and her puzzle plot both plays fair and surprises. She displays the traditional mystery writer's overconfidence in the ability of nearly any object to give forth multiple identifiable fingerprints, but this assumption doesn't invalidate the plot.

**** Robert L. Fish: ***Pursuit,*** Doubleday, $10.00. Few of the novels in the current glut of Nazi fiction begin with as ingenious a premise as this one: as Germany faces inevitable defeat, a war criminal takes the identity of an imprisoned Jew to escape postwar punishment. Working on a larger canvas than usual, Fish reaffirms in this powerful novel his standing as one of the crime field's great story-tellers. (As so often with this publisher, the jacket copy is overinformative to an almost criminal extent.)

**** Ruth Rendell: ***A Sleeping Life,*** Doubleday, $7.95. In what must be accounted an exceptional month, another of the big guns hits a bullseye. Chief Inspector Wexford, though troubled by his married daughter's blossoming feminism, solves a murder through his understanding of the ambiguities of male and female roles and relationships. Rendell handles the tricky plot with almost Christie-like skill.

*** S. S. Rafferty: ***Fatal Flourishes,*** Avon, $1.95. Though you might not guess it from the title, this volume collects thirteen of the stories about Captain Jeremy Cork and his amusing "financial yeoman" and Watson, Wellman Oaks. Their adventures, set in Revolutionary-era America, comprise a series nearly as ratiocinatively distinguished and historically intriguing as Lillian de la Torre's Johnson-Boswell stories. Though most of the tales have appeared in ***EQMM*** or ***AH MM,*** a few, notably "The Curse of the Connecticut Clock" and "The Massachusetts Peep-O'Night," are original to this

volume.

*** William Hjortsberg: ***Falling Angel,*** Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, $8.95. In a neat cross-breeding of seemingly disparate species, Hjortsberg introduces genuine occult elements into a vividly written New York-based private-eye novel. The result is a performance as flashy as the eyecatching gold dustjacket.

*** Richard Condon: ***Death of a Politician,*** Richard Marek, $9.95. Like the author's earlier ***Winter Kills,*** this novel features some very thinly disguised recent political figures in a satirical whodunit. Not surprisingly, the lampooning outstrips the detection. For readers not too outraged by bad-taste humor, the book offers entertainment and occasional insights.

*** Nick Christian: ***Homicide Zone 4,*** Signet, $1.95. In the first of a new procedural series, two psychopathic killers (connected in an unusual and ironic way) are the quarry of New York cops. It's familiar ground mostly, but Christian travels it very well.

Peter Israel: ***The Stiff Upper Lip,*** Crowell, $8.95. Traditional private-eye stuff — gangsters, drug-trafficking, etc. — in a Parisian setting. The most unusual element is the background of French professional basketball. The constant use of racial epithets limits detective B. F. Cage's likeability.

** Ann B. Ross: ***The Murder Cure,*** Avon, $1.50. For most of the distance, this is routine romantic suspense, redeemed somewhat by interesting observations on hospital life by the nurse-narrator. The conclusion, though, is quite striking and (in a gothic) unusual.

** Victor Miller: ***Hide the Children,*** Ballantine, $1.95. This novel of a kidnaped busload of school children rouses ambivalent feelings. The numerous sadistic passages seem distastefully exploitative, giving the enterprise a sleazy air, but some of the scenes and characters (adult and child) are quite nicely done.

** Don Pendleton: ***Monday's Mob,*** Pinnacle, $1.50. To many, Mack Bolan (the Executioner) symbolizes everything that is wrong with the contemporary crime novel. While Pendleton is no stylist and the philosophy of vigilanteism his novels espouse may revolt many, the man can tell a story. To me, the Executioner's philosophical self-justifications are more interesting than the ample bloody violence.

Courtesy Call
by *Russell Martin* [14]

Department of "First Stories"

As has happened so often in the past, we are giving you two "first stories" by the same author in the same issue. Russell Martin, of Beaconsfield, Quebec, Canada, submitted two stories simultaneously, and we couldn't choose between them — so here are first stories numbers 513 and 514, back to back.

The most interesting fact in Mr. Martins dossier is his age. He was born in Montreal in 1961 — which made him only 17 when he sent in his two stories. At the time of this writing he is a student at John Abbott College in Ste. Anne de Bellevue, Quebec. His "major" hobbies include reading omnivorously, trying to perfect his command of French, and "living life to the fullest extent possible — there is nothing like it for getting ideas for stories."

"Courtesy Call" is a dying-message detective story — "a kind of a crazy" case...

When you're the Detective Lieutenant in charge of the Homicide Squad of a fair-sized city, and you only get a few weeks off each year, you try to make every day count toward forgetting your job. But when the town you're passing through on the way to this year's resort has a Chief of Police who is an old friend, you feel obliged to talk shop for a few hours more, anyway.

Art Nye's town doesn't have many major crimes committed in it, so I felt no qualms about disturbing him during working hours. But he wasn't in his office when I arrived at his station house; the desk sergeant said he was in the interrogation room.

If Art was busy, I had no intention of disturbing him. I could just leave word I had called and come back some other time. But as it happened, Art came into the sergeant's room just as I was about to leave.

"Hello there, Nye."

It took him a few seconds. "Fall! Ev Fall, of all people!" There was some back-pounding.

"I was going to drop by to chew the fat, Art, but I'm told you're

busy, so—"

"Uh — wait a minute, Ev. I may need some help on this."

" 'This'?"

"A murder case. You're still on your city's Homicide Squad?"

"In charge of it."

"Oh! Congratulations! Maybe that's even better."

"What do you mean?"

"The first homicide we've had in town since that barroom brawl nine years ago, and there was no mystery in that one, just lots of gore. Maybe I need some big-city expertise on this one — it's a nasty case, and kind of a crazy one."

"Well, Art, if you need my help, I'll be glad to give it." I wasn't sure I was so keen on this, but there I was.

"Thanks. Let's go into my office. I'll tell you about it there."

When he had sat down at his desk and lit a cigar, he resumed. "Did I ever mention the Reardons to you, Ev?"

"Reardons?"

"Rich family. Live here in town. Old man owned the dye works a few miles off."

"I don't think you have. I presume they're part of the town nobility—"

"Yup."

"Look rather down on other people—"

"Right."

"And now they've come a big cropper because they've got trouble — trouble that involves the police."

"You know it. The trouble, to be exact, is murder. Old Julian Reardon was stabbed to death a couple of days ago. Julian was the owner of the dye works."

"Got any idea who did it?"

"I've narrowed it down to three people. Julian left a will leaving all his estate — quite a sum — to be equally distributed among his three children."

"You suspect them?"

"No, I don't. Because they're dead."

"Oh. You think they were killed too?"

"No, no. They all died years ago, and the deaths were either the result of disease or accident. Point's this: Julian had a clause in his will leaving the money that would go to each child to that child's children, if the child predeceased him."

"And there are three grandchildren?"

"One from each of the two sons and one daughter. Jack Reardon, Peggy Reardon, and Abby Freed. All in their early twenties. Three nicer young people you couldn't meet. But from what I've found out,

they could all use some spare cash about now. And nobody else with a motive was anywhere near the house when the old man was killed. And the crime looks like the work of a person Julian trusted: whoever killed him was allowed in, and had a cup of coffee with the victim before doing the dirty work. That points to one of the grandchildren — they were about the only people in town Julian could be said to trust."

"And there are no clues?"

"Killer left no fingerprints, no suspect has an alibi. All we have is this." Art took a Xerox copy out of his pocket with an abstracted air. "Julian was filling out a few forms when his murderer came to call. After he was stabbed, and presumably after the killer left, he managed to drag himself across the room to where he'd put down the forms, and before he died he picked up his pen and scrawled out—"

"A dying message!"

He looked a trifle displeased. "Yes. And here it is." He gave me the copy. At the bottom of the sheet, printed crudely over a printed form, were two capital letters:

"Em ay," I said. "In caps."

"Which may or may not mean anything," Chief Nye grunted. "From what we've seen of his papers, Julian always printed in block capitals."

"Uh huh," I said. "MA, eh? I suppose you've thought of the obvious connections."

"I have. But maybe you can think of an interpretation that didn't occur to me. Any suggestions?"

"Any of the suspects have a Master of Arts degree?"

"I don't think any of 'em has cracked open a book since high school, Ev," Art informed me.

"Any of 'em in Massachusetts lately? Or work for the phone company?"

"Phone company?" my friend asked, puzzled.

"*Ma* Bell?"

"Oh! No, they all work at local businesses — when they feel like working, which they don't have to do. And they don't travel."

"Either female suspect have a baby lately?"

"No. And Julian's mother," he added, "died in '47."

"Thorough, aren't you?" There was a pause. "This fancy stuff doesn't ring true. If the old man wanted to name his killer, wouldn't he just print the killer's name?" I started to mutter. "Wait! What are their middle names?"

"Not that they ever use them, but Jack's middle name is William, Peggy's is Sharon, and Abby's is Elizabeth."

"Nothing there. I — hmm. Did the old man have any nicknames

for them?"

"Not a formal old boy like Julian Reardon. They were about the only people he didn't call 'Mr.' or 'Miss,' and them he called by their full names."

"Too bad. Any of them have a hobby, or a habit, or something along those lines, beginning with MA?"

"Ev, I have gone through every word beginning with MA in the dictionary. There isn't one that has a special relationship with any of the three suspects."

"And yet he wrote MA..." I trailed off into muttering again. Suddenly a bomb went off inside my head — or perhaps it would be more correct to say a flare, illuminating everything in one bright flash. "Yes!" I said involuntarily.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, that's it. That *has* to be it. Art, I know who killed Julian Reardon!"

Art looked at me skeptically. "Well?" he said.

"Your problem, Art," I began pedantically, "was that you were too close to the people in the case to see things properly. I take it you knew old Reardon fairly well?"

"Fairly."

"Well enough, at least, to call him and his grandchildren by their first names."

"Look, Ev, I don't know what you're getting at, but I can assure you that I'm not letting personal feelings interfere with my role in a murder investigation."

"That's not my point. So close, in fact, that you call the three suspects by their nicknames."

"Everybody does."

"But Julian Reardon didn't! That was a good point I made a minute ago about how Reardon wouldn't indulge in fancy word games if he wanted to name his killer. He would just write down the killer's name.

"So if Jack Reardon had done it, the old man would have written JA. If Abby Freed had, he would have written AB. Name or nickname, the message would start with the same letters.

"But — what about Peggy Reardon? If you wrote her nickname, you'd start with PE — but if you'd called her by her full name all her life, you would write down the first letters of her full name. And Peggy, as you know, is the diminutive of Margaret — MA."

I leaned back in my chair and looked smugly at Art Nye. His mouth and eyes were slightly open.

"How the hell did I miss that?" he asked.

"By being too close to the target," I answered.

The Final Report
by *Russell Martin* [15]

Russell Martin's second first story is about a bureau chief in retirement who is just vegetating — until his successor needs help...

❖

Old Pollard had finished with the supper dishes and was sitting down to watch Walter Cronkite when somebody buzzed his apartment from downstairs. He raised his white eyebrows when he heard the caller's voice, but asked him to come up.

Two minutes later young Knowles was doffing his coat. Knowles, with his masculine good looks and Young-Man-Succeeding-in-Business manner. Knowles, the man Pollard thought of whenever he heard the word "brash." Knowles, Pollard's successor as chief of a certain secret government bureau — and in the older man's opinion, an incompetent young twerp. And just now, Knowles, with his apparently inextinguishable optimism and brisk manner completely gone, twisting his hands, in a fit of nervousness.

"Just let me put your coat in the closet," Pollard said. "There. Have a seat on the couch. Go ahead, young man — it's not electrified! Now, let me sit down in my chair. Aaah.

"So. Mr. Knowles. I didn't expect ever to see you again after my retirement party. Are you here to keep an old man company? Or is there something you need?"

Knowles cleared his throat. "Mr. Pollard," he began, "it's six months since I took over as chief of the bureau. Since then, I — well, I like to think that I've had things pretty well under control. We've been able to handle whatever's come up — and things have been quiet lately. But now—" He broke off.

"Let me guess," Pollard said, trying hard to keep the delight out of his voice. "Something has happened that's too much for you." He let a note of sternness creep in. "And you want the old man's advice."

Knowles nodded unhappily. "That's it, sir. I wouldn't ordinarily come to you like this, because—"

"Because you'd rather die than admit that there are some things beyond you by going to your predecessor for help?"

"Oh, no, sir, not that at all. I just thought that after all your years at the bureau, you wouldn't want us to disturb you once you'd finally retired—"

"Disturb me?" Pollard roared. "*Disturb* me? Let's get something straight, Knowles. In the half year since that damned farewell party, since I holed up permanently in this tiny apartment, I have been going stir-crazy! Living on my pension, sitting here watching TV, reading books, and generally vegetating — and the only break in the monotony is a visit every Saturday from my daughter and two runny-nosed grandchildren. *Disturb* me? This visit tonight may just save my sanity! At least you bring back a memory of the way it used to be at the bureau, before I reached their damned retirement age..." He trailed off.

"Well, then, sir — since you seem willing to help us" — Pollard snorted — "I'll have to warn you that what I'm about to say is to be kept absolutely, Class-A, top-secret—"

"I wish," Pollard said acidly, "that the current chief of the bureau would realize that the former chief of the bureau is probably even more conversant with security rules than he himself." A sudden thought leaped into Pollard's mind. "Hey, wait a minute! You're not violating any regulations by telling me about this, are you?"

"No, sir! I have the permission of — uh — the people upstairs to come to you. And," he added, "I'm putting you in no danger, either. I've made sure that there are no tails on me tonight, so your life is in no jeopardy because I've come here."

Pollard ignored this last. "Well, since everything is quite clear and understood, get on with it. Even an old man like me doesn't have unlimited time."

Knowles cleared his throat again, and began, "A couple of weeks ago a double agent of ours was found in his apartment, with his throat cut. The police have dismissed it as a burglary that got ugly, and we were happy to let them — but the bureau is sure that the other side found him out and killed him.

"Georg — the double agent — had reported to us several days before his death that he was on to something big — a cell of enemy agents planted here for the purpose of passing on clandestine communications. He claimed to have made contact with part of the cell, and to have learned of the existence of a list of the cell members' names and addresses.

"A list like that would be invaluable to us, and we told Georg to get it. After some hard bargaining he agreed.

"Well, to keep the story down to essentials, Georg got careless. Or the cell members, or their superiors, found him out some other way. In any event, one morning while George was encoding a report to us, he was murdered in his apartment.

"The report he was making out at the time of his death stated that he expected to get a copy of the list from a contact in the cell the next

day. The assassins took the original message, and the coded version he was writing, when they left."

"Then how do you know what he was going to tell you?"

"His typewriter was one of those jobs that use cartridge ribbons, and the one he had in it at the time was a one-time version — that is, after you strike a letter, that space of the ribbon is used up permanently. The killers didn't take the ribbon cartridge, so we got the message from it. We reproduced Georg's words from the letter impressions, thus." Knowles took a sheet of paper from his pocket. The message read:

> WILLGETLISTTOMORROW.LANDSGIVINGITTOME,ATOUR USUAL MEETING PLACE. UNTIL THEN NO CONTACT FOR SECURITYREASONSYOUWILLUNDERSTAND.

Pollard read it over several times. "No spacing, of course — it wouldn't show up on the ribbon... easy to make out, though." Then he looked up. "Did Georg always use capitals?"

The younger man shrugged. "The code he was using did, so he probably felt more comfortable with them here, too."

"L-a-n-d-s giving it to me... was Lands the name of his contact in the cell?"

Knowles looked agonized. "We don't know," he said. "That's why I'm here. You see, Georg never told us who his contact was. If he had, we'd have picked him up after we discovered the murder. But he did say that it was someone connected with the apartment building where he lived — but not a tenant."

"So look into them all."

"We did. We've managed to narrow it down to four possibilities whose pasts and recent activities make it possible for them to have been Georg's contact in the cell."

"All right, pick up all four and question them until the real contact breaks."

"We can't. There was a big fuss raised over leakage of secret material to people outside the bureau, and since then we've been wary of giving away things in the course of questioning an innocent suspect."

"And that's where I come in, eh? You need to know who Georg's contact was, but you can't figure it out."

"That's it, sir," said Knowles with obvious reluctance. "None of the four has dropped out of sight, or made any changes in their routines, so we guess the cell people think they're safe. But they may yet decide to play it cautious and pull the man out. Time could be of the essence."

"All right, all right. Tell me about your four suspects."

“Well, sir, the landlord lives in one of the apartments in the building; it’s a very luxurious place” — Knowles seemed about to add, “unlike this one,” but changed his mind — “and in some ways, he’s our prime suspect. All four had equal opportunity to carry on the activities of the group members — you’ll understand that I’m reluctant to go into details — but the ‘land’ reference in Georg’s message might be construed as pointing to him — as the landlord.”

“It says ‘lands,’ to be precise,” Pollard pointed out.

“But if it’s short for ‘land is’—”

“Then it should have an apostrophe, right? There are no other errors of English in the message. How was Georg’s English?”

“Perfect.”

“Just so.” Pollard nibbled a nail. “Perhaps he meant ‘lands’ as the plural of ‘land.’ Was the landlord the sole owner of the place?”

“Yes. And Henley — that’s his name, Marvin Henley — lives alone, too.”

“Hmm. Other suspects?”

“There’s also the day doorman, Lester Gill. He seems to be completely clean, a perfectly ordinary man, but so do the others. On the other hand, Gill is an absolute cipher — lives alone, no family, and apparently no friends—”

“Which probably isn’t important, one way or the other,” Pollard broke in. “You persist in wasting time on irrelevancies! And the other two?”

“Another man who works as a doorman, Stanley Fitch. He works evenings—”

“And?”

“Otis Avery, the building superintendent,” Knowles finished lamely.

“The landlord, the super, and two doormen,” Pollard said, and leaned back. “Excellent. And all four men had an equal opportunity to carry on whatever activities the cell member indulged in?”

“Yes, sir. We have reports on their activities since a short time after the murder of Georg, but no one has been eliminated so far.”

“I have an idea our friend won’t be fingered that way,” Pollard said. “I can’t get my mind off that word ‘lands.’ It doesn’t make sense. Maybe there’s another meaning in it somewhere. Any of the four have any connection with land, or real estate in general, apart from Henley’s obvious connection?”

“We looked into it. No, they don’t.”

“Lands. Lands. I don’t suppose a Land camera comes into the affair anywhere—”

“No.”

“Just an idea... Is there any possibility that the message was a

fake?"

"Fake?"

"Yes, fake. That Georg's killers not only stole the plain and coded versions of the message, but also the ribbon cartridge he had used, and substituted one with a message carefully designed to frustrate you because it was partly incomprehensible?"

Knowles shook his head. "We doubt that, sir. For several reasons. First of all, we have no record of the other side ever pulling that kind of stunt before. It just isn't their style. Second, that one-time cartridge was the only cartridge Georg had in his possession, from what we've found by searching his apartment. If the killers did fake the message, it means that they brought another cartridge with them to the apartment. Most unlikely.

"Third, if someone did intend to fake a message, why invent such a cryptic one? All they'd have to do is accuse an innocent person of being the cell member; that would point us in exactly the wrong direction long enough to get their real man — Henley, Gill, Fitch, or Avery — into hiding. As it is, all they've done is keep our suspicions on all four possibilities. No, sir, we think Georg really did write the message."

Pollard was impressed. Perhaps he'd been hasty in his judgment of Knowles. He was showing the kind of sense his job called for.

"In that case, Knowles," Pollard said, "I'll be happy to tell you whom to pick up for questioning."

Knowles was speechless.

"What threw you, and me for a while," Pollard went on, "was the 'lands' part of the message. It was our major stumbling block — but when you interpret it properly it's also the solution to the problem.

"No possible meaning of the word 'lands' seemed to have any application here. When I learned that, I began to wonder if Georg wasn't trying to tell us *something else.*"

"Something else? But—"

"Don't interrupt! Remember, you reconstructed the message from the typewriter ribbon, imagining where the spaces — which don't show up on the ribbon — go. When you got to l-a-n-d-s, the five letters you didn't understand, you assumed they formed one word. But they don't have to.

"Respace it. L-a-n-d-s. Is there a word *in* those five letters?"

Knowles mulled it over. "L-a-n... a-n-d... *and!"*

"A-n-d. And. If we assume that *and* is part of what Georg was trying to say, what of *l* and *s*?

"L — and — S. L and S. Has this any possible meaning? Review the names of the suspects — Lester Gill has a name beginning with L, and Stanley Fitch has one beginning with S."

Knowles's mouth was open. "The doormen? *Both* of them?"

"Why not? No reason to think that there couldn't be two cell members where there could be one. And you'll notice that Georg used their *first* initials in naming them. Don't you usually call the doorman of your apartment building by his given name?"

The younger man's expression had turned to one of satisfaction. "Makes sense," he murmured. "More than any of the other ideas." He stood up. "Mr. Pollard, I have to go now — there's work to be done." He held out his hand. "Thank you. I'll be seeing you again soon."

"I'm quite sure of that, young man," Pollard said.

Grocery List
by *Gina Haldane* [16]

This is the 515th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine... "As some day it may happen that a victim must be found, I've got a little list — I've got a little list." — from Koko's Song in The Mikado *(Gilbert and Sullivan)...*

The author, Gina Haldane, formerly an actress, is now vice president of a video systems company, and "writing is an alternative to the pressures of owning a small business." She is "interested in all sorts of things, from the conventional (sewing, design) to the more controversial (human liberation). Above all, I am addicted to reading and have inadvertently committed nineteen cereal boxes to memory!"...

❖

1 doz eggs
1 lb butter
(I remember when we were first married how Bob loved my omelets)
1 gal milk
1 lg box Whoopie Wheetsies
(I wish the kids wouldn't believe all that junk on television. They keep begging me to get them this, get them that)
1 bottle Kalm-Tabs (*for stress)*
1 six-pack Macho beer
(which will be gone by the end of Sunday s football game. Bob'll be dozing in front of the TV, wearing that old undershirt)
1 head lettuce
2 tomatoes
3 lbs hamburger
(I remember when Bob said, "Steak and caviar, baby — marry me and it'll be steak and caviar all the way!" And now we can barely afford hamburgers)
1 pkg Sweetums disposable diapers
3 jars Bitsie-Bites baby food
(maybe if we hadn't had three kids in three years, maybe then)
1 box Storm detergent
1 floor mop
(or maybe if Bob had let me keep my job instead of being a broken-down housewife, I could have had a career)
1 Calorie-Counter's Meals for One

1 doz cans Lo-Lo Kola

(I don't know why I try to lose weight. I'll bet she *would be eating all the time if* her *husband was seeing another woman)*

1 bunch asparagus

(I bet they think I don't even know about their affair! Well, if they think I'm going to let them get away with it)

1 box rat poison

(damn them!)

That's not My Name
by *Barbara Williamson* [17]

Department of Second Stories

Barbara Williamson's first story, "The Thing Waiting Outside," appeared in the December 1977 issue of EQMM. We called it "a story of dark and terrifying implications." Her second story offers more darkness and terror, but of an entirely different sort. There is the dream that keeps coming back, and the thing in her hand, and the puzzle that must be solved... a subtly written story, with fine imaginative touches...

❖

Three months before Ruth's twelfth birthday her father married again.

There was a garden wedding and Ruth wore a yellow dress with long full sleeves and carried a bouquet of late roses.

During the ceremony the bride was fidgety and the groom had trouble with the sun in his eyes, but Ruth stood very still and did not take her eyes from the minister's face.

Later, when her father's friends told her how pretty she looked — "Just like a Renoir!" one gushy matron proclaimed — Ruth smiled shyly, but said nothing.

No one was surprised. It was well known among her acquaintances that Ruth was a quiet child who enjoyed playing alone and reading her books behind closed doors.

At the reception she ate a small piece of cake and tasted her first champagne. She didn't like it very much, but was too polite to say so.

Just before her father and his new wife left, they came to her to say goodbye. Her father kissed her and his wife, a plumpish blonde with stiff sculptured hair, gave her a hug.

"Now you're *my* little girl too," she whispered into Ruth's ear. *And you,* Ruth thought, *are my very own Wicked Stepmother and I shall hate you as long as I live.*

Then she put her lips against the perfumed cheek close to her own.

"How sweet!" everyone said.

While her father and his wife were away on their honeymoon, Ruth stayed at the home of a classmate.

Every third day a postcard came for her. Ocean scenes with golden sands and blue water. Once there was a sunset with a lone palm tree black against the vivid sky.

"That's pretty," said the classmate, whose name was Patricia. Ruth thought her stupid, but at least she didn't giggle like some of the other girls.

"Yes," Ruth said.

The card was signed "Mother and Daddy," but the fussy, curly handwriting was not her father's.

When she was alone, Ruth tore each card into bits and flushed them down the drain.

That night she had the dream.

It was not a new dream. From time to time, as long as she could remember, the same house blossomed in her sleep. A silent place of higgledy-piggledy rooms with many doors and windows. There was bright sun outside and the rooms were filled with the airless, heavy heat of summer.

In the dream she was alone, walking from room to room, but always with the feeling that just beyond a certain wall or just beyond the next door was the person she was looking for. She also knew she must move with stealth so as not to be seen or heard.

Her breath came quickly. Not from fear, but from something close to exultation and a sense of purpose.

And always she held something in her hand.

What it was, she did not know. She could only feel it there, tight in her hand. Something hard and a little heavy. Something vital to her mission.

The dream always ended the same way. She was climbing the stairs, slowly, lightly, with the thing in her hand held close against her side. She climbed and climbed, but never reached the top of the stairs, and the dream dissolved around her in a red, shifting haze.

But the night the postcard came, there was a difference in the dream. Just as she started up the stairs, breathing the hot, sulfurous air, she looked down and understood at last why she could not see the thing she held in her hand. It was hidden in the folds of her long skirt. The kind of skirt that had not been worn for many years. And she knew that she was not a child, but a tall grown woman. She could almost feel the contours of her body and the strange lines of her face.

This time the dream did not fade. She was dragged from it by busy hands and a voice whispering in her ear.

"Wake up, Ruth! Wake up."

Pushing the hands away with a strength not her own, she said, "That's not my name."

She opened her eyes to see Patricia's impassive moon face close to

her own.

It was almost morning. The windows were pale with light and the shadows in the room were turning gray.

"You were talking in your sleep," Patricia said. "I think you were having a scary dream."

Ruth didn't say anything. She felt an urge to reach out and smack that stupid blank face. To keep from doing so she turned over and buried her face in the pillow. She could still feel the house in the dream. It was just out of sight in her mind, hiding from her.

After a minute Patricia padded back to her own bed.

The room grew brighter and colors began to appear. A blue lampshade. Pink ballet prints on the wall.

Ruth turned over. "What did I say?"

Patricia lifted her head. Her short hair frizzed over her ears. "What?"

"What did I say in my sleep?"

"Oh." Patricia flopped back down and the bed squeaked. "Nothing that made much sense. Something about blood." Then she yawned and turned over to finish her sleep.

When Ruth's father and his wife came home they were brown from the sun and both of them laughed a lot. Ruth could see they were happy being married to each other.

The three of them moved into the house that Ruth had shared with her father. It seemed to have grown smaller. Nowhere could Ruth escape the sight or the sounds of her father and his wife. She made excuses to stay in her room or out in the yard under the maple trees. Sometimes she even visited Patricia, playing endless card games, often letting Patricia win just to postpone going back to the house where she lived.

She hated the house now. The warm colors in the rooms, the worn old rugs, were giving way to pale brittle things. Busy flower patterns covered the chairs and hung across the windows. Ruffles appeared — on the curtains and the beds and even on the tablecloths. Fat china animals of all sizes ("my collection" her father's wife announced with pride) came to sit on the mantels and shelves. Some of them even had painted eyelashes, and Ruth was not safe anywhere from their coy, mocking smiles.

She was glad when the school term began, where for long hours she could hide in her studies, protected by the familiar smells of chalk dust and new books.

The dream came again and again and she began to look forward to it as she would to a puzzle that must be solved.

Sometimes when she woke from it, even in the middle of the

night, she would go to the mirror and turn on the light, wondering who she would see. She was disappointed to find her own slender face and straight dark hair there in the glass.

On the first day of November the weather turned suddenly and bitterly cold. Ruth walked home from school slowly, savoring the emptiness of the streets and the wind that smelled of dead leaves and lost summer.

Inside the house she found her father's wife wrapped in a heavy sweater and complaining of drafty windows. She insisted that Ruth put on more clothes and drink a cup of hot soup. "We'll catch our death," she said ominously.

That night Ruth's father brought in a supply of wood and stacked it against the house near the back door. Ruth watched as he chopped away at the logs with a small hatchet, trimming them to fit the fireplace in the living room. Brown leaves swirled around his ankles and the blade of the hatchet flashed in the light from a single bulb over the back door.

Later, as flames began to flower in the fireplace, he put one arm around his wife and the other around Ruth.

"That should keep my girls warm," he said and hugged them both.

To Ruth the room was already suffocatingly hot, and in the light from the fire the china animals were laughing at her, their hard mouths melting in glee.

That night she had the dream again.

She glided through the crazy-quilt of rooms, her long skirt brushing the walls and doorways without a whisper of sound. Sun glittered against the windows and the air was furnace-hot, burning in her throat and lungs.

She climbed the stairs and the thing in her hand pressed against her leg with heavy intent.

For the first time she reached the top of the stairs and saw the door she was to enter. It led into a bedroom.

A sound pulled her out of the dream.

She could feel the bed beneath her body, could sense her own room around her, but she did not open her eyes. *I must know,* she thought. *I must know.*

Tap-tap on the door.

"Wake up, Ruth, honey, or you'll be late to school." Again tap-tap. "Ruth?"

"That's not my name."

She whispered the words in someone else's voice. Then she opened her eyes. She looked down at her hand and flexed her fingers. They were cramped and there were small indented crescents on her

palm made by her nails as she gripped the thing in her dream.

The following Saturday was her birthday.

Her father and his wife gave her a red dress. It was an expensive dress, shirred and flounced. There were puff sleeves and small shiny buttons.

Her father had always given her books and games before. She turned to him, but she could not find him behind the smile his new wife had given him.

"Thank you very much," she said, feeling the dress cold and slick under her hands.

There was a lamb roast for dinner and a large frosted cake, and later they went to the theater to see a magician and a hypnotist.

Ruth wore the red dress and sat next to her father's wife. She suffered the small soft hands touching her now and then and the little voice whispering, "Isn't he marvelous?" each time the magician performed a trick.

She chirps, Ruth thought. She chirps like a silly bird.

There was an intermission and Ruth was given ginger ale to drink. She stood quietly in her new red dress, sipping from a paper cup and saying yes, she was having a wonderful time, and yes, the magician was marvelous.

She disliked magicians almost as much as she did clowns. Her father had known that once, but he did not seem to remember. She looked at him, wanting to ask, "Where are you, Daddy?" — but, of course, she did not. She was much too polite.

After the intermission the hypnotist appeared on stage. He did not look the way Ruth thought a hypnotist should look — lean and satanic with sleek hair and perhaps a painted beard. He had almost no hair at all and his body reminded Ruth of a stuffed bear.

He introduced a woman whose name was Christine, but under hypnosis she called herself Zela and spoke of life in an ancient middle-eastern kingdom. The hypnotist explained that this was not unusual. Certain individuals, under hypnosis, or perhaps in sleep, re-lived earlier incarnations.

Christine-Zela left the stage and then the hypnotist called for volunteers from the audience.

One man was told that he was swimming the English Channel and the audience roared at his exaggerated strokes in the air. Another man was told he was George Washington.

"You are now going to chop down the cherry tree," the hypnotist said. "Here is your hatchet," and he placed an invisible object in the man's hand.

The man tightened his fist and began to swing at the air,

chopping furiously. The audience laughed, a swell of sound that hurt Ruth's ears.

The man's face was getting red and he was breathing hard.

The soft little hand clutched Ruth's arm. "Isn't that funny? Isn't it?"

Ruth watched the man's arm go up and down, up and down. The laughter grew and the lights were burning Ruth's eyes. She squinted to see and now something was flashing in the man's hand. Up and down, up and down.

She began to climb the stairs. The hot light shifted around her. Now she stood in the doorway of the bedroom. Outside, there was sun and bright sky. And in the room a dumpy old woman. No. The light shifted again. It was a man. Not in the bedroom. Somewhere else. She lifted her arm. Again and then again. The red mist fell around her and the room dissolved.

"Ruth," someone said.

"That's not my name."

There was a laugh and she opened her eyes. Her father and his wife were leaning over her, their faces too close. The purple curtains were pulled across the stage and the people were leaving.

Ruth rubbed her eyes. "I must have fallen asleep."

Her father's wife chirruped. "Poor baby! We've kept her up too late. She doesn't even know who she is!"

Her father grinned and patted Ruth's hand. "She used to say that all the time when she was little. We'd say 'Ruth, do this,' or 'Ruth, do that,' and she'd say, 'That's not my name.' "

His wife put her little hand against Ruth's cheek.

"I know who she is. She's our little girl."

Ruth, suffocating in the new red dress, shivered under the hand on her flesh.

On the ride home Ruth sat in the back seat. This was her place now, but she did not mind. Being there put her farther away from the chatter of her father's wife. She was terribly afraid that some day they might ask her to sit between them.

She kept her face turned to the window. Stars glittered icily in the late-night sky and the houses and lawns were dusted with snow.

Once, when the chirping stopped for a moment, Ruth asked her father a question.

"Did I tell you what my name was when I said I wasn't Ruth?"

"No." There was a grin in her father's voice. "I always thought it might be Cleopatra."

Laughter trilled from his wife's mouth.

Don't, Ruth thought. But the sound went on, spiraling deep into her mind, touching forgotten pain.

Before she went to bed, Ruth was given a cup of hot chocolate. She sat in the living room, alone with her father. He poked at the ashes in the fireplace and yawned now and then. His wife had already gone into their bedroom. “To undo my face,” she said. Perhaps even now she was smearing her skin with the gooey pink cream she favored.

“I must have been a funny little thing,” Ruth said to her father.

“Um?” He covered another yawn with his hand.

Ruth sipped from the cup. The chocolate was too sweet. She thought of the soft hands that poured the milk and stirred the sugar and cocoa. She put the cup down, feeling a little sick.

“I said I must have been a funny thing when I was little. Do you remember when I thought I had a sister?”

Her father turned to her and smiled. “I sure do. You toddled around the house calling her.”

“Did she have a name?”

“I don’t think so. You just called for ‘sister’.”

Ruth picked up the cup and held it to her lips, but she didn’t drink. She could taste the name on her tongue. The name of her sister. But even as she searched for it, it drifted away.

She looked up at her father. “Do we look at the pictures now?”

Each year, on her birthday, she and her father looked at the family album and he told her about the woman in the pictures — the slim smiling woman who had been her mother and had died too soon.

Her father’s eyes slid to the doorway and then back to Ruth. “It’s late,” he said. “We’ll do it tomorrow.”

When he kissed her good night, Ruth thought, I’ll hurry to sleep. She could feel the dream just behind her eyes, waiting.

Deep in the night she woke, listening.

Sleet rustled against the windows.

Rain, she thought. We need it. It’s been so hot.

She got out of bed and went to the window. She did not see the frozen darkness. She saw instead a sun-soaked yard. A picket fence. Houses close by.

No. No rain. She sighed and lifted invisible hair from her hot neck.

She straightened her bed and left the room.

The house with its patchwork of rooms was very quiet. Sun pressed against the windows. The air was clotted with heat.

She went into the kitchen, wrinkling her nose at the smell. Mutton broth. How could they, on such a morning?

She went to the back door, holding aside a skirt that did not exist. She opened the door and looked out into the dark. She saw the barn.

And the pear tree. The yard washed in sunlight.

The stovewood was stacked close by the steps. The hatchet lay on top of the pile, its blade catching the light. She smiled.

When her hand closed around the wooden handle, she knew at last what the thing in her hand was...

When it was over and all the people came — the police, the doctors, the neighbors — she was the only one who remained calm. But she was very puzzled. They kept putting their horror-struck faces close to hers and calling her “Ruth.”

Why were they doing this? To confuse her, perhaps. To make her confess.

But she gave them no satisfaction. She sat very stiffly in her chair, her hands folded in her lap. She knew how to be careful. Very, very careful.

At last one of the doctors came to her and took her bloodstained hand in his.

“Ruth...”

She turned to him and with her free hand smoothed the wrinkles from her invisible skirt.

“Why do you call me that? Surely you know my name.”

“No.” The doctor’s hand was cold and trembling. “I don’t know your name. Please tell me what it is.”

Poor fool! She straightened and took her hand from his.

“I’m Miss Borden, of course,” she said. “Miss Lizzie Borden.”

A Type of Murder
by *Dorothy A. Collins* [18]

Department of Second Stories

Dorothy A. Collins' first story, "Found on the Cookbook Shelf," appeared in the October 1978 issue of EQMM. Since her first sale and her debut in print she has been working hard, and her second published story shows much more confidence with the form and a much more imaginative approach to plot. Carry on, Dorothy Collins, let nothing impede your progress...

❖

Uncle Avery wrote Gothic mysteries. I thought they were dreadful things, but the public gobbled them up like hamburgers, and he made a fortune out of them. Unhappily, success soured him, because it wasn't the kind of success he really wanted. But the money kept rolling in, so he kept churning out his tales of maidens-in-distress, and growing meaner and more embittered every year.

I was his housekeeper-and-secretary. He'd offered me the job when my husband died, and I grabbed it like a lifeline. He was my father's brother, and outside of a few scattered cousins I was his only relative. Naturally I had great expectations, and I thought that besides latching onto a job I really needed, and a good one at that, I could reinforce my position by taking good care of him. And at first it wasn't too bad.

He was just starting his fifteenth Avis Crystal bestseller at that time, and was still enjoying the fruits of his pedestrian labors, which included a mansion on ten acres of lush woodland, a couple of expensive cars, a cook, and a gardener. So all around it was a nice setup for me. I kept the house running smoothly, typed up his rough drafts, handled his correspondence, and encouraged him to write the G.A.N. But Great American Novels are written by great American writers, and I found out pretty quickly that Avery Curtis wasn't one of those and never would be. And after a few more years he apparently came to the same conclusion, because his disposition, none too pleasant to begin with, took a turn for the worse, and he started to drink heavily.

I took the brunt of his ill-nature, and it wasn't long before I

stopped merely tolerating him and began to actively loathe him. And to wish him dead. Not at some indefinite when-the-time-comes date, but soon. Very soon.

I knew I was his sole beneficiary, because over the past years, when he'd come to depend heavily on me, he used the inheritance bait as a lever to keep me with him. But at 68, in spite of his excessive drinking and smoking, he was in good physical shape, and I could see the years stretching ahead, with me getting older and Uncle Avery getting meaner, and any way you looked at it, it was an ugly picture.

So when I came into his study one afternoon and found that short paragraph on top of the other typed sheets of yellow copy paper, the idea started forming with the gathering momentum of an avalanche.

Because, you see, that paragraph of Gothic prose was a perfect suicide note. Absolutely perfect.

And the conditions were perfect, too. I glanced over at Uncle Avery, snoring loudly on the couch, off on another of his monumental benders. He was out for the count. And Mrs. Herman, the cook, was off for the day. Uncle Avery and I were alone in the house.

First of all, although my fingerprints were all over the place, I realized I couldn't superimpose them over his. So I went into the kitchen and got a pair of thin plastic utility gloves.

Then I went back and re-read the paragraph:

> I can't face any more of this. I thought life had so much more to offer me, but it's become a travesty — meaningless, empty. I can see no reason for going on with it. I'm sorry, sorry for everything.

As I said, absolutely perfect, especially considering Uncle Avery's situation and state of mind, which I'd be sure to reveal in full. I looked at the sheets underneath and saw that it was supposed to be stream of consciousness — the heroine mooning about her trouble and turmoil — and wondered why he'd taken it out of the machine with the page unfinished. Probably to crush it and throw it away, except that the need for a drink intervened. Well, I'd roll it back in, first making sure to destroy the preceding few pages so there'd be no continuity to give anything away. Fortunately he didn't number the rough-draft pages, which used to annoy me, but now it worked in my favor.

Of course they might suspect that I'd typed the note myself, but only his fingerprints would be on the keys and on the paper, and I was pretty sure there was some way they could tell about different styles of typing — pressure and touch, or some such thing. So that was all right.

I went upstairs and got his vial of sleeping capsules. I had no idea how many would constitute a lethal dose, but I knew they were

deadly in combination with alcohol, and he was sodden right now. I emptied all ten of them into a large glass, filled it halfway with Scotch, stirred it until the powder was dissolved, and added ice. I tasted it with a teaspoon and spat it out into the sink. It didn't taste of anything but straight Scotch. I made a drink for myself, put both glasses on a tray with some ice and the Scotch bottle, and carried it into the study.

I set down the tray and brought the phone over to the couch.

"Uncle Avery." I shook his shoulder. " *Avery.* Telephone. Ed Grimes."

He came awake slowly — surly, befuddled, and belligerent.

"Telephone," I shouted. "Ed Grimes — your agent." I held out the receiver.

"Hell with'm," he muttered. "Call'm back."

Well, that was easier than telling him Grimes would get tired of waiting and hang up. I replaced the receiver and helped him to a sitting position.

"I made us drinks," I said. "We'll be eating in half an hour." I handed him the glass.

"My God, I'm thirsty."

I watched as he drained the glass. And then, unaccountably, I started to go to pieces. I did it, I thought, my heart pounding. It's done. He's finished. I needed a drink badly now, and I reached for my glass, my hand shaking so badly that I had trouble getting it to my mouth.

Uncle Avery didn't notice.

"Make me another one, like a good girl," he mumbled.

But I wanted that glass the way it was, with the dregs of the powder in it. So I said, "All right, but let's get you comfortable first." I heaved him back into a lying position, and within a few moments he was snoring again. I wanted another drink myself, but I knew I had to keep my head clear. I put on the plastic gloves and wiped off his glass and pressed his fingers around it several times. I did the same with the vial of sleeping pills, and put both of them on the floor next to the couch. I rolled the "suicide note" into the typewriter and peeled off the top five pages of the manuscript draft for burning.

And that was it. I couldn't think of anything else — couldn't think at all, at that point. So I burned the papers, flushed the ashes down the sink, and dragged myself upstairs. Not to sleep, but to lie awake and watch the clock and wonder feverishly if I'd overlooked anything.

They had all left, the whole milling throng of them, but Chief of Police Holbrook was still there, rubbing my nerves raw.

"Let's go over it once more, Mrs. Marlin," he said quietly.

So I gritted my teeth and went through the whole business again — Uncle Avery's bitterness at his success, the disintegration of his personality, the drinking bouts, and finally his banishing me from the study last night, refusing dinner, and my discovery of his body and the suicide note that morning.

He still held the yellow sheet of paper, now encased in plastic, in his hand. He kept glancing at it, frowning, and re-reading it. It was driving me crazy.

"I didn't type that thing, if that's what's on your mind," I blurted, and could have bitten off my tongue.

He looked at me thoughtfully. "No one's suggesting you did, Mrs. Marlin. But even assuming that it's established that Mr. Curtis did in fact type this paper, there's something about it that bothers me."

Here it comes, I thought. "What exactly bothers you, Chief?" I said.

"Well, now, for one thing," he said, "this doesn't strike me as the kind of letter a man would write — even a suicidal man. It's a little too flowery, too high-flown, if you see what I mean. More like what a woman might write, seems to me."

"Uncle Avery was that kind of writer," I said. "He was steeped in that type of lavender prose. He wrote so much of it that he started to talk that way, even think that way. It's perfectly compatible with his personality, after all these years."

"Mmm. Don't know much about writing, myself, especially the kind he wrote. My wife reads that stuff — I lean more toward the detective-type yarn — my line of work, after all." He chuckled.

I managed a strained smile, but couldn't think of anything to say.

He walked to the desk and bent over the pile of manuscript draft. "Eyes aren't what they used to be," he said, and fished out his glasses. He riffled through the top few pages. "Certainly sounds like his style. Although that could work both ways, of course. Could be that this was a part of the book he was working on.

Prove it, you Keystone Cop, I thought grimly. I was sweating freely now, and I surreptitiously wiped my palms on my skirt.

He transferred his attention to the typewriter then, and suddenly he stiffened. He reached for a 3x5 memo pad and tore off a page, inserting it in the machine. He tapped out six letters, glanced over at me, and ripped the paper out of the roller. He picked up the plastic-wrapped yellow sheet, put the 3x5 page on top of it, and walked over to me. He handed me the papers without comment, his eyes cold, and the word he'd typed leaped out at me, turning me cold. It read:

murder

“I don’t understand,” I said weakly.

But I did. I knew now what I’d overlooked, the damning thing that gave it all away. I stared at the ugly word that stood out black and clear against the pale typing on the yellow sheet underneath it, and I shivered.

“He wrote that paragraph, all right, Mrs. Marlin,” said Chief Holbrook. “But it was part of the story he was working on.

“A man doesn’t type out a suicide note and *then* put a new ribbon in his machine.”

Waiting for Mr. McGregor
by *Julian Symons* [19]

The first of a new series by Julian Symons

Julian Symons is one of the finest writers of crime and detective stories, both long and short, in our time. So you can imagine our delight when Mr. Symons advised us that he had written a new series of four contemporary short stories. You will find the stories different in theme, background, and storyline, but alike in reflecting Mr. Symons' approach to the modern mystery story, alike in revealing Mr. Symons' writer's-eye-and-mind, with characterization as important in the scheme of things as suspense and the sequence of events.

"Waiting for Mr. McGregor" will appear in an anthology titled verdict of thirteen, *edited by Julian Symons, to be published by Faber & Faber in the United Kingdom and by Harper & Row in the United States.*

Now, meet Hilary Engels Mannering and his BPB — his Beatrix Potter Brigade — and attend one of the strangest trials by jury on unofficial record...

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Even in these egalitarian English days nannies are still to be seen in Kensington Gardens, pushing ahead of them the four-wheeled vehicles that house the children of the rich. On a windy day in April a dozen perambulators were moving slowly in the direction of the Round Pond, most of them in pairs. The nannies all wore uniforms. Their charges were visible only as well-wrapped bundles, some of them waving gloved fists into the air.

The parade was watched by more people than usual. A blond young man sat on a bench reading a newspaper. A pretty girl at the other end of the bench looked idly into vacancy. A rough-looking character pushed a broom along a path in a desultory way. The next bench held a man in black jacket, striped trousers, and bowler hat, reading the *Financial Times*, a man of nondescript appearance with his mouth slightly open, and a tramp-like figure who was feeding pigeons with crumbs from a paper bag. Twenty yards away another young man leaned against a lamppost.

A pram with a crest on its side approached the bench where the blond young man sat. The nanny wore a neat cap and a blue striped

uniform. Her baby could be seen moving about and a wail came from it, but its face was hidden by the pram hood. The pram approached the bench where the man in the black jacket sat.

The blond young man dropped his newspaper. The group moved into action. The young man and the girl, the three people at the next bench, the man beside the lamppost, and the man pushing the broom, took from their pockets masks which they fitted over their faces. The masks were of animals. The blond young man was a rabbit, the girl a pig, the others a squirrel, a rat, another pig, a cat, and a frog.

The masks were fitted in a moment, and the animal seven converged on the pram with the crest on its side. Half a dozen people nearby stood and gaped, and so did other nannies. Were they all rehearsing a scene for a film, with cameras hidden in the bushes? In any case English reticence forbade interference, and they merely watched or turned away their heads. The nanny beside the pram uttered a well-bred muted scream and fled. The child in the pram cried lustily.

The blond young man was the first beside the pram, with the girl just after him. He pushed down the hood, pulled back the covers, and recoiled at what he saw. The roaring baby in the pram was of the right age and looked of the right sex. There was just one thing wrong. The baby was coal-black.

The young man looked at the baby disbelievingly for a moment, then shouted at the rest of them, “It’s a plant. Get away, fast!”

The words came distorted through the mask, but their sense was clear enough, and they followed accepted procedure, scattering in three directions and tearing off the masks as they went. Pick-up cars were waiting for them at different spots in the Bayswater Road, and they reached them without misadventure except for the tramp, who found himself confronted by an elderly man brandishing an umbrella.

“I saw what you were doing, sir. You were frightening that poor __”

The tramp swung a loaded cosh against the side of his head. The elderly man collapsed.

The baby went on roaring. The nanny came back to him. When he saw her he stopped roaring and began to chuckle.

Somebody blew a police whistle, much too late. The cars all got away without trouble.

“What happened?” asked the driver of the car containing the blond young man and the pretty girl.

“It was a plant,” he said angrily. “A bloody plant.”

Hilary Engels Mannering liked to say that his life had been ordered by his name. With a name like Hilary Mannering how could

one fail to be deeply esthetic in nature? (How the syllables positively flowed off the tongue.) And Engels, the name insisted on by his mother because she had been reading Engels' account of conditions among the Manchester poor a day or two before his birth — if one was named Engels, wasn't one almost in duty bound to have revolutionary feelings?

Others attributed the pattern of Hilary's adult life to his closeness to his mother and alienation from his father. Others said that an only child of such parents was bound to be odd. Others still talked about Charlie Ramsden.

Johnny Mannering, Hilary's father, was a cheerful extrovert, a wine merchant who played tennis well enough to get through the preliminary round at Wimbledon more than once, had a broken nose and a broken collarbone to show for his courage at rugby, and when his rugby and tennis days were over became a scratch golfer. To say that Johnny was disappointed in his son would be an understatement. He tried to teach the boy how to hold a cricket bat, gave Hilary a tennis racquet for his tenth birthday, and patted the ball over the net to him endlessly. Endlessly and uselessly.

"What I can't stand is that he doesn't even try," Johnny said to his wife Melissa. "When the ball hit him on the leg today — a tennis ball, mind you — he started sniveling. He's what you've made him, a sniveling little milksop."

Melissa took no notice of such remarks, and indeed hardly seemed to hear them. She had a kind of statuesque blank beauty which concealed a deep dissatisfaction with the comfortable life that moved between a manor house in Sussex and a large apartment in Kensington. She should have been — what should she have been? A rash romantic poet, a heroine of some lost revolution, an explorer in Africa — anything but what she was, the wife of a wealthy sporting English wine merchant. She gave to Hilary many moments of passionate affection to which he passionately responded, and days or even months of neglect.

In the nursery years that many psychologists think the most important of our lives, Hilary was cared for by big-bosomed Anna, who washed and bathed him, wiped his bottom when he was dirty, and read to him endlessly the stories of Beatrix Potter. Peter Rabbit, Squirrel Nutkin, and Samuel Whiskers, Pigling Bland and Jeremy Fisher, became figures more real to the small boy than his own parents.

And brooding over all these nursery characters, rather as Hilary's father brooded with angry discontent over his unsatisfactory household, was the farmer Mr. McGregor, who had put Peter Rabbit's father into a pie, and whose great foot could be seen in one

illustration about to come down on Peter. Anna read and Hilary shivered, finding in the figure of the farmer an image of his own frightening father.

Childhood does not last forever, but there are those who cling to childish things rather than put them away. Hilary went up to Oxford — which to Johnny Mannering was still the only possible university — in the early Sixties, just before the days of the Beatles and permissiveness. There he displayed the collected works of Beatrix Potter on his shelves beside books more fashionable for an undergraduate.

"But, my dear, these are the existential masterpieces of the century," he said in his pleasant, although thin and slightly fluting voice. "The passions, the deceits, the *poignancy* of it all — really Proust and Joyce are nothing to it." Beatrix Potter gave him the only celebrity he achieved at Oxford. He joined two or three radical groups and left them within a few weeks, did a little acting but could not remember his lines, had three poems published in a little magazine.

He had just one friend, a broad-shouldered blond puzzled-looking Rugger blue named Charlie Ramsden, who had been at Hilary's public school, and had always regarded him as a genius. This view was not changed when Hilary took as poor a degree as his own, something they both attributed to the malice of the examiners. Hilary, on his side, treated Charlie with the affectionate superiority one might give to a favorite dog.

"You must meet Charlie," he would say to new acquaintances. "He's terribly good at *rugby football."* Charlie would smile ruefully, rub his nose, and say, "'Fraid I am." They were really, as the acquaintances remarked with astonishment, almost inseparable. Not long after he came down, Hilary surprised his friends, not to mention his parents, by marrying a girl he had met in his last year at Oxford. Joyce was the daughter of an old and enormously rich family, and the wedding got a good deal of attention from gossip writers. Charlie Ramsden was best man.

The marriage was six months old when Johnny Mannering, driving home with Melissa after a party, skidded on an icy road and went over the central barrier into the lane of oncoming traffic, where his car was hit head on by a lorry. Both Johnny and Melissa were killed immediately. At the age of 25 Hilary found himself the distinctly rich owner of the family business. Within another six months his marriage had ended.

Hilary never told anybody what was in the note that Joyce left on the drawing-room mantelpiece of their house in Belgravia, beyond saying that she had done the boringly conventional thing as usual. There was no doubt, however, that she had gone away with a man,

and his identity did cause surprise. The man was Charlie Ramsden.

Hilary divorced Joyce, she married Charlie, and Joyce and Charlie settled in South Africa where he became a farmer. Those closest to Hilary (but nobody was very close to him) said that he recovered from the loss of Joyce, but that he never forgave Charlie Ramsden. He never mentioned either of them again.

In the years that followed he gathered the biggest collection of Beatrix Potter manuscripts, first editions, and association copies in the world, put up money for a radical magazine with which he became bored after a couple of issues, and for two plays both of which were flops. He traveled abroad a good deal, sometimes in the company of young actors who appeared in the plays. In Amsterdam, on one of these trips, he met Klaus Dongen.

Klaus was half Dutch, half German, a revolutionary terrorist who believed that destruction of all existing national states must precede the advent of a free society. His group, the NLG or Netherlands Liberation Group, claimed credit for half a dozen assassinations including one of a prominent Dutch politician, for a bomb that blew up in a crowded restaurant, and another in a shopping center that killed 20 people and injured twice that number.

Klaus was not interested in Hilary's ideas, but in his money. Hilary was not interested in Klaus so much as in his NLG associates who seemed to him as fascinatingly dangerous as panthers, perfect associates for somebody named Hilary Engels Mannering. It was through Klaus that Hilary got in touch with young men and women of similar beliefs in Britain. He did not take them on trust. Each of them was required to perform an illegal act — arson, theft, violent robbery — before acceptance into the BPB. What did BPB stand for? The Beatrix Potter Brigade.

It was Hilary, of course, who had chosen the ludicrous name, and he had gone further, giving members of the group names of characters in the stories and insisting that they should wear appropriate masks when carrying out group exploits. Among their achievements were a bomb planted in a Cabinet Minister's house (it exploded, but everybody was out), a fire bomb that had burned down most of a large London hotel, and a payroll robbery from London Airport.

Hilary himself stayed in the background, interviewing possible new recruits and setting them tests which some refused to undertake. He would then explain that he was a theatrical producer who had been testing their reactions (which was true enough in a way), and pay them off with ten-pound notes. The enterprise had the elements of theatrical childishness that he loved, and for three years now it had completely absorbed him.

On the afternoon of the unsuccessful attempt in Kensington

Gardens the members of the group gathered in an extension of Mannering's wine cellars that ran below the Thames near London Bridge. They entered by a door in an alley, which led to a passage and a storeroom. In the storeroom a perfectly camouflaged door led to a single large windowless room.

There were wine racks along two walls with dusty bottles in them. On the other walls were prints of Beatrix Potter characters — the cat Simpkin buying food for the tailor of Gloucester, Mrs. Tiggy-winkle the hedgehog in her kitchen, Pigling Bland on the way to market, and of course Peter Rabbit who was shown escaping from Farmer McGregor's attempt to catch him with a sieve. The ceiling was low and the lighting came from lamps invisibly sunk into it, so that the effect was one of mysterious gloom. There was only one visible door, which was said to lead directly to the Thames.

"It's romantic," Klaus Dongen had said when he saw it. "And ridiculous."

"And safe," Hilary had replied.

There were ten of them besides Hilary, and he waited until they all arrived, refusing to listen when both Peter Rabbit and Simpkin tried to tell him what had happened. Hilary was now in his late thirties, a tall thin man with a sharp nose and a mouth perpetually turned down at the corners as though he had just tasted something bitter. He was older than the rest of them, and although his fluting voice had something absurd about it, he seemed in some indefinable way dangerous. His restlessness, his jerky movements, the sudden grimaces intended as laughs, all gave the impression that he was inhabited by some violent spirit which he was only just able to keep under control.

"Now that we are all here," he said at last, "I should like a report on what happened. Peter, you were in charge of the operation."

The thickset blond young man said, "It was a plant. They must have been on to it the whole time. It's a bloody miracle we all got away."

Hilary sighed gently. "That is hardly the way to present a report, Peter—"

"My name's not Peter. I'm sick of playing kids' games." There was a murmur of agreement. "If you'd set this up properly—"

"Is that the way it goes? You're blaming me, yet you are incapable even of presenting a report on what went wrong."

"How can you present a report on a disaster?" He stared down at the table as though he were a discontented schoolboy, looking remarkably like Charlie Ramsden.

Hilary pinched out the end of a Russian cigarette, used a long narrow lighter, and puffed blue smoke. "Since you are unable or

unwilling to present a report I must do so myself."

"You weren't there," said the tramp who had been feeding pigeons.

"Really, Squirrel Nutkin? Would you like me to describe the man you hit when you got away?" The tramp looked at him unbelievingly. "I was on the seventh floor of a building almost opposite, watching through binoculars."

"But not present," somebody said.

"Not present, as you say. The directing mind should be separate from the executive hand. But let us examine the affair from the beginning. It was suggested by a foreign colleague that we should take the son of the Duke of Milchester and hold him for ransom. The sum asked would be a quarter of a million pounds, which the Duke could comfortably have paid by selling a couple of pictures. Now let me tell you the object of this — to use a piece of deplorable American slang — snatch. Why do we want the money? It is to give financial backing for a project to be undertaken from overseas by a very *very* famous person. Can you guess?"

"The Wolf." The pretty girl who had sat on the bench with the blond young man breathed the words reverently. And reverence was in order. The Wolf was the most famous terrorist in the world, a man who killed with impersonal detachment, and had never been known to refuse a job if the fee was big enough.

"Well done, Pigwig." Hilary smiled, but even his smile was acid. "But it is not wise to use that name. I shall call him Mr. McGregor, the ruler of all the little flopsy bunnies and squirrels and mice and pigs. And do you know Mr. McGregor's target, his projected target?"

"One of the newspaper owners," Squirrel Nutkin suggested.

"A politician? The Chancellor, the Prime Minister?" That was Pigwig.

Hilary shook his head. "Look higher."

"You don't mean—"

"Oh, but I do. Mr. McGregor will be aiming at, what shall I call it, the highest in the land."

There was a gasp around the table. Again Hilary gave them his acid smile. Then the blond young man said, "But it all went wrong — we couldn't even get the kidnaping right. Why should the Wolf think we can set up an almost impossible job when we've fallen down on this one?"

"The Wolf — Mr. McGregor — sets up his own jobs, as you call them. We should be his paymaster, nothing more. But, as you say, this exercise went wrong. We had not one but two dress rehearsals, and you knew exactly what the nanny looked like. So what happened?"

"The baby wasn't the Duke's. It was pitch-black."

“That’s right. I looked into the pram, I saw it.” Pigwig nodded agreement.

“They knew what we were doing and substituted the black baby. And you can see what that means.” The thrust of his jaw, the jutting of his chin, were really very reminiscent of Charlie Ramsden.

Hilary rose, walked quickly and silently over to a cupboard above the wine racks, and opened it to reveal glasses, and, in a refrigerated section, several bottles of champagne. This was a ritual. When they assembled at the cellars there would always be champagne in the cupboard, and it was always Moet and Chandon of a good year. Pigwig, one of the group’s newer members, had thought of saying that she would prefer whiskey, but had decided against it.

The corks came out, the champagne was poured. Hilary raised his glass.

“I drink to Mr. McGregor. And to the success of his mission. When he comes.”

“But he won’t be coming now, will he? As you said, he only works for cash.” That was the man in the black jacket and striped trousers, an unnoticeable sandy fellow with a toothbrush mustache.

“Very true, Simpkin. But in the meantime we have a problem. The conclusion from what happened is simple and unmistakable.”

“Somebody grassed.” It was the only other woman round the table who spoke. She was in her late twenties, had a knife scar on her cheek, and a heavy ruthless face. It had been a touch of irony on Hilary’s part to name her after the genial hedgehog, Mrs. Tiggy-winkle.

“Again I deplore the use of slang, but it expresses a truth. Traitor, Judas, grass — it does not matter what name we use. The fact is that one of us must have told the authorities. Or told somebody else who gave us away. Did any of you tell a friend, a lover, a wife, a husband?” Nobody spoke. “Just so. It is as I feared.”

“There’s one queer thing,” Simpkin said. “If the counterespionage boys were tipped off, why weren’t they all over the place, why let us get away? Isn’t it possible that it was a genuine change of plan, and we were just unlucky?”

“With a *black* baby, Simpkin? I should like to think that was true. No, somebody was playing a joke on us.”

“I know who it was,” Peter Rabbit said. He pointed across the table at Simpkin. “You.”

“And how does Peter Rabbit make that out?” There was an undercurrent of mockery in Hilary’s voice, but he did not fail to notice that Simpkin was left sitting at one end of the table, the others drawing away as though he had an infectious disease. Simpkin himself seemed unaffected. He drained the glass in front of him and refilled it

from one of the bottles on the table.

"I'll tell you how I know," Peter Rabbit began in a low furious voice. Hilary stopped him. His eyes were bright with pleasure.

"We must do this according to law. There was no trial in any Beatrix Potter story—"

"Sod the Beatrix Potter stories," said the man who had been leaning against the lamppost, a youth whose spottiness was partly hidden by his thick beard.

"Now then, Samuel Whiskers, no bad language *if* you please," Hilary said indulgently. The young man who had been pushing a broom spoke. He was another recent recruit, a broad-shouldered man with a round ruddy face and a snoutish vertical-nostriled nose that had led Hilary to christen him Pigling Bland. Like all of them except Peter Rabbit and Hilary himself, he spoke in the mid-Atlantic accent that denies the existence of English class distinctions.

"He's right. We don't want any playing about. If there's a grass we've got to know who it is."

"Precisely, Pigling. But let us do it by considering evidence rather than by simple accusation. Simpkin, you are the accused — you may remain where you are. Peter Rabbit, you will be prosecutor — you should go to the other side of the table. The rest of you will serve as the jury and should group yourselves at the end. Thank you. I will serve as judge, summing up the evidence, although the verdict will be yours. I think I should sit away from you. Over here, perhaps." He placed his chair beside the door. "If you wish, Simpkin, you may ask one of the jury to defend you."

"I'll defend myself," Simpkin said. Of all the people in the room he seemed the least moved.

"Very well. Prosecuting counsel, begin."

The blond young man did not look at Hilary. "I should like to say that this is a stupid way—"

Hilary tapped on the arm of his chair with the lighter he was using for another cigarette. "Out of order. Produce your evidence."

"All right. Simpkin joined the group four months ago. Since then he's been concerned in three jobs. The first was leaving a bomb in an Underground train. He did that himself. At least he says so, but the bomb never went off. Did he ever leave it?"

Simpkin intervened. "Can I answer that?"

"Not now. You'll have your turn." Hilary's eyes had been closed, and now he shut them again. With eyes closed Peter Rabbit's voice sounded exactly like Charlie Ramsden's.

"Two. Simpkin was one of the people who planned to get a comrade out of Brixton Prison. Almost at the last minute the comrade was moved to Parkhurst. Coincidence? Perhaps. Three. A couple of

weeks ago we should have had an open-and-shut job, getting documents out of a Ministry file. They'd have been very useful to us. You, Jeremy Fisher—" He nodded at the man who had been driving one of the getaway cars. "—I don't know your name, so I have to call you that — you set it up, you had a friend on the inside. Simpkin is suppose to know the Ministry layout, which is why he was involved so closely. The job went through all right, but the papers weren't in the file.

"And four, the job today. You were the grass."

He stopped. Hilary opened his eyes. "Is that all?"

"No. But I'd like to hear what he has to say."

Simpkin's features were watchful; he really did look a little like the cat he was supposed to represent. "No need to say much. One, I left the bomb. The mechanism was faulty, it was reported in the press."

"Of course. You fixed a cover story."

Simpkin shrugged. "Number two was a coincidence, must have been. Number three, maybe the papers had been taken out months earlier. Anyway why pick on me, why not on Jeremy Fisher?"

"He wasn't in on the other jobs. You were."

"So were you." Simpkin permitted himself a brief catlike smile. "And if you remember, I was against this snatch. I thought it was too risky."

"I'm an old member, not a new one. We've made mistakes before, but it's since you joined us that things have been going wrong persistently. And of course you'd be against the snatch, that was another bit of cover."

Hilary moved in his chair. "You said there was something more."

"Yes. Some of you know that I have — that I see people—"

"We know about your social position," Mrs. Tiggy-winkle said in her harsh voice. "We know you meet the best people. I've seen your name in the papers."

"All right," Peter Rabbit said. "Through my position I've been able to get a good deal of information. You know that," he said to Hilary, who nodded and smiled his acid smile. "Last Wednesday I had dinner at Morton's, which is a small luncheon-and-dining club with a very restricted membership. Top people in the services and the Ministries, a few members of the Government and so on."

"Top people, period," Mrs. Tiggy-winkle said. "Nice company you keep."

The young man ignored her. "Morton's has a couple of rooms where you can take people for dinner if you've got something extremely private to discuss. On this night — it was fairly late, very few people in the Club — three people came out of one of these

rooms. One was Giles Ravelin, who's an assistant head in MI 6. He's a member of Morton's, and the two others must have been his guests. One was Sir Llewellyn Scott who acts as a sort of link between the police and the counterespionage agencies. And the third was Simpkin." He paused. "I want him to explain how he came to be there. If he can."

It was for such moments as these that Hilary lived, moments of excitement outside the routine of life. Revolutionary intrigue he had found for the most part boring, a matter of dull little men discussing how to obtain power over other dull little men. But the possible visit of the Wolf, the fun of calling him Mr. McGregor, the tension in this long low windowless room with its hidden light that made every face look ghostly pale — oh, these were the moments that made life worth living, whatever their outcome. How would Simpkin react to Charlie Ramsden — no, to Peter Rabbit? What would he say?

The silence was total. All of them were staring at Simpkin, waiting for Simpkin. At last he gave a faint catlike cough. "What was the light like?"

"The *light?"* Then he realized the question's purpose. "A good deal better than it is here. Good enough to recognize you."

"How near were you to this man?"

"I was four feet away or less, sitting in an alcove. You didn't see me, or I don't think so, because I was partly hidden. But I had a good view of you."

"You saw the man for — how long? Two seconds?"

"Long enough. It was you. I'll ask you again. What were you doing there, whom do you work for?"

From the rest of them, those appointed as a jury, there came a murmur, an angry dangerous sound. "Answer him," Samuel Whiskers said. "If you don't, we'll know what to think."

"I can't answer," Simpkin said flatly. "I wasn't there." There was a moment's pause while they digested this. "I was never inside that place in my life, never heard of it. I gave him a chance to say he was mistaken, but he didn't take it. He's lying."

The two men looked at each other across the table. "You damn Judas, you won't get out of it like that," Peter Rabbit said.

Hilary steepled his fingers and offered a judge's comment. "It comes to this then, that we have an accusation but no proof."

"You said it was last Wednesday. What time did this meeting take place?" the pretty girl known as Pigwig asked.

"Between ten and ten thirty at night."

"You're sure it was Wednesday, certain that was the day?" Pigwig insisted.

As Peter Rabbit said he was sure, Simpkin seemed suddenly to

wake from a brown study and showed his first sign of emotion, almost shouting at her to keep out of this, it wasn't her affair. She disregarded him.

"Last Wednesday, Bill—"

"You are not to use personal names," Hilary cried. "Pseudonyms *must* be preserved."

"What stupid game are you playing, who do you think you're kidding?" she screamed at him. "Half of us know who the others are and what they do, and those who don't could easily find out. At ten o'clock last Wednesday, Bill wasn't at any Morton's Club or whatever it's called. He was in bed with me, had been all evening. Around eight I got up and made scrambled eggs, then we went back to bed."

"Is that true?" Hilary asked Simpkin, who shrugged and then nodded. "Two different stories. They can't both be right."

The round-faced young man called Pigling Bland said, "No, they can't. And I know who's telling the truth. A couple of days ago I saw him — Peter Rabbit — walking along Piccadilly. He was with somebody who looked familiar, though I couldn't place him. But I knew who it was as soon as I heard his name today, because I've seen his picture in the papers often enough. It was this Scott, Sir Llewellyn Scott."

"You're sure?"

"I can't prove it, can I? But yes, I'm sure."

"Does anybody else wish to speak? Very well. You have heard the evidence, and I don't think there's any need for a judicial summing up. Members of the jury, will those of you who find Simpkin guilty put up your hands." No hand was raised. "Simpkin, you are acquitted."

"That's not the end of it," Mrs. Tiggy-winkle said. "He's the grass." She pointed at Peter Rabbit, who seemed suddenly as isolated as Simpkin had been.

"He was lying. He must be the grass, stands to reason." That was Samuel Whiskers.

"Do you wish to pass a verdict on Peter Rabbit?"

"I certainly do. Guilty." Mrs. Tiggy-winkle's face was grim. The scar on it pulsed red.

"How many of you agree with her? Put up your hands." They all went up except Simpkin's. "Simpkin?"

"I just think he made a mistake. No need to suppose anything else."

"Then who do you think grassed on us?" Samuel Whiskers shouted. Simpkin gave one of his characteristic shrugs.

"Peter Rabbit, you have been found guilty without a single dissenting vote. Have you anything to say?"

The blond young man passed a hand through his hair in a gesture

intolerably reminiscent of Charlie Ramsden, and cried out in bewilderment. “I don’t know what’s happening — this is all crazy, Hilary. You know me, you know it is.”

“No names, Peter. You know the rules,” Hilary said gently. He got up from his chair, walked over to the young man, and held out his pack of Russian cigarettes. “Let’s talk about it.”

“I’ll smoke my own.” Peter Rabbit shook one from a pack and put it in his mouth.

“Here’s a light.” Flame shot up from the long narrow lighter, and smoke came from the cigarette. Peter Rabbit looked at Hilary in total astonishment. He put a hand to his neck. The cigarette fell out of his mouth. He dropped to the floor.

Simpkin stood up. Somebody gave a cry, sharply cut off. Hilary giggled and held up the lighter.

“I got it from one of the NLG boys. An ordinary lighter, you’ve seen me using it. But if you press a button at the bottom a dart comes out.” He pressed it and a tiny thing, hardly thicker than a needle, buried itself in Peter Rabbit’s body. “Very effective.”

“Nobody said kill him,” Samuel Whiskers said.

“The verdict was yours. There was only one possible sentence.”

“But he’d been in the group as long as me, as long as any of us.”

“There are no medals for long service.” Hilary gave his acid smile. “This door leads to a chute that will deposit Peter Rabbit in the Thames. If one of you will give me a hand, we can dispose of our grass. Then I suggest that we sit down and consider some new plans for raising the necessary cash to bring Mr. McGregor over here.”

Simpkin helped him out with the body. They stood together while it slid down the chute and vanished. When they returned, an obituary on Peter Rabbit was pronounced by Mrs. Tiggy-winkle.

“Good riddance to bad rubbish,” she said.

Just after three o’clock on the following afternoon Simpkin, whose name was Bill Gray, entered an office block in Shaftesbury Avenue, took the lift up to the third floor, and went through a frosted-glass door lettered *Inter-European Holidays, Travel Consultants.* He nodded to the girl in reception and walked down a corridor to a room at the end. There, in a small office with three telephones in it, including one with a direct line to Giles Ravelin, he found Jean Conybeare and Derek Johnson — alias Pigwig and Pigling Bland — waiting for him.

“My God, what a shambles,” Derek said.

“Macabre.” Jean shivered. “He enjoyed it, that Hilary Mannering. He’s a real creep.”

“It was a bad scene,” Derek went on. “If it hadn’t been for Jean

here, I don't know what might have happened. 'He was in bed with me, had been all evening,' " he said, falsetto. "Wonderful."

"You provided the clincher, Derek, with that story about meeting him in the street."

Derek Johnson shook his head. "Poor bloody Peter Rabbit, it was a clincher for him all right. It was just his bad luck, Bill, that he saw you coming out of that room with Ravelin and Scott."

Bill Gray was at his desk looking through papers about Operation Wolfhunt. Now he looked up. "No need for tears. He was just an upper-class twit who got himself mixed up with a gang of thugs."

"Mannering isn't a thug, he's a psychopath," Jean said. "The *pleasure* he took in using that lighter — I hate to be in the same room with him." She asked curiously, "Did you know he'd seen you at Morton's?"

"I was afraid he might have."

"So what would you have done if I'd not come up with that story?"

"Shot it out. But that would have wrecked the operation."

"Mannering should be in a padded cell."

"No argument. But let me remind you that if we take in his crackpot Beatrix Potter Brigade we lose a chance of catching the Wolf. That's the object of the operation, remember? Now, we couldn't let them get away with kidnaping a Duke's son, though I was able to make sure everybody got clear. They still have to raise funds to get the Wolf over here, and we've got to help."

They waited. Bill Gray's catlike features were intent, he might have been about to pounce. "I think this is going to come best from you, Derek. You've got a friend who's a watchman in a bank in Cheapside. He'll provide duplicate keys. There's wads of money in the vaults. We knock out the watchman and pay him off, collect the cash. The money will be slush, but they won't need to use much of it until they pay out the Wolf, and I'll put the word around so that in the meantime anything they use will be honored.

"We'll talk about the details, Derek, after I've set it up. Then you can go to Mannering and talk about it. The Wolf's said to be in the Argentine at the moment, but he's in touch with an NLG man there and we have some contacts with him. When he knows that his fee's going to be paid he'll come over."

"And until then?"

A smile touched Bill Gray's face and was gone like winter sunshine. "Until then we're waiting for Mr. McGregor."

The Theft of Yesterday's Newspaper by *Edward D. Hoch* [20]

A new Nick Velvet story by Edward D. Hoch

Nick Velvet, the unique thief — and in a sense, the unique detective. As a thief, Nick steals only the valueless, the worthless — "never money or jewels or art treasures" — and for a minimum fee of $20,000 (inflation has not yet reared its ugly head). But to be a successful thief it is usually necessary for Nick to solve a mystery, thus becoming a detective with a unique purpose — a detective whose aim is not to mend the law but to break it.

In his newest caper-case Nick is hired to steal a copy of yesterday's newspaper — and usually there is nothing so dead (worthless) as yesterday's newspaper. But then there was the mystery to solve: why should a copy of yesterday's newspaper be worth $20,000?...

❖

Nick Velvet slid a stack of chips across the green felt of the roulette table on the top floor of London's Playboy Club and waited for the wheel to be spun by a pert blonde girl with long legs and perfect teeth.

"So much, Nicky?" Gloria asked cautiously at his side.

"I've a hunch black is due to come up."

But as the girl spun the wheel, Nick's attention was distracted by a stout man on his right. The man thrust something into his hand and when Nick looked down he saw it was a check drawn on a London bank in an amount approximately equal to twenty thousand American dollars. It was payable to Nick Velvet and signed by someone named Felix Poland. "That's better than a calling card," Nick commented.

"I thought so," the man said with a smile. His eyes were deep and alert, though the wrinkles around them hinted at an age past 50. "You see my name there. May we talk business?"

"It would be a pleasure, Mr. Poland."

Gloria was tugging at his sleeve. "Nicky, we won!"

"Great! Scoop up the money and keep playing. I have to go chat with this man." He slipped the check into his wallet and followed Felix Poland to a lounge area at the end of the room.

It was only eight o'clock, but Nick already knew it would be a

profitable evening.

Actually, their luck had been running well since Nick and Gloria arrived in London three days earlier. It was a vacation for them — replacing the dampness of January in Westchester with the dampness of January in London — and Nick had no thought of doing any work. But the weather on their arrival was unusually good, almost balmy, and their good fortune was compounded at the hotel which discovered it had no double room reserved for them and promptly put them in a three-room suite for the same price.

Nick had been to London before and he enjoyed showing Gloria the sights, especially places like Buckingham Palace and the Regents Park Zoo which had figured in a previous adventure. They'd registered at some of the casinos when they arrived, and observed the two-day waiting period before being allowed to gamble. Finally this was their first gambling night, and judging by the unexpected check from Felix Poland their lucky streak was continuing.

"How do you know my name?" Nick asked when he and Poland were settled at a corner table in the lounge.

"I have contacts around London. Someone told me you were here and you're just the man I need." He sipped his drink and added, "The check is quite good, in the event you're wondering."

"That's my usual fee, as you must know," Nick said. "The only thing untouched by inflation. But I steal only the valueless — never money or jewels or art treasures."

"Exactly. And are you available tonight?"

"What do you want stolen?"

"Yesterday's newspaper. The *London Free Press,* to be exact."

"Certainly a valueless item," Nick agreed. "I'd suggest searching through some of the rubbish barrels around town."

"I believe the one I need is at the home of Hope Trennis, the actress. Certainly if anyone has one, she has. She's throwing a party tonight and I was invited weeks ago. You and your lady can be my guests."

"Wouldn't she be suspicious?"

"No, no, the party's to view her film '100 Minutes' on BBC television tonight. I distributed the film to British theaters last year and she'd expect me to bring guests. She'll be pleased to see fellow Americans — a great deal more pleased than she'll be to see me, really. Our relations aren't too cordial these days."

"But you're still going to her party?"

"As I said, I was invited weeks ago, before our falling out."

"Just where is the newspaper?"

"No idea. Somewhere in the house. In her study safe, if she hasn't

already destroyed it."

"Why is it so valuable?"

"It wouldn't be, to anyone but me."

"You're telling me that a copy of yesterday's newspaper is valuable to you only, and that it's in the possession of Hope Trennis and nobody else?"

"There might be a few other copies around, but I'm sure hers would be the easiest to find."

"Very well," Nick agreed. "When do we leave?"

Felix Poland glanced at his watch. "We should be getting along."

Nick went back to the roulette table where he found Gloria with a new stack of winnings. "This is our lucky night, Nicky!"

"It certainly is. We're invited to a party." He started to gather up the chips. "Let's turn these in."

"Do we have to?"

"We'll come back tomorrow. This party might be fun. There'll be some movie people there."

"Like who?" she asked suspiciously.

"Hope Trennis, the actress. It's at her place."

Gloria's eyes widened. "Really?"

As Nick cashed in the chips he hoped their luck would hold through the night.

Hope Trennis' home was an exquisite townhouse within sight of Belgrave Square — the sort with a fireplace in every room and a cluster of quaint chimneys on the roof. Though Hope was an American actress she had resided in London for well over a year — ever since she finished filming the highly successful "100 Minutes." Nick was hardly a movie fan but he had seen that one, a suspenseful chase film in which the entire action took place during the one-hundred-minute running time of the picture itself. Now, about a year after its London theatrical release, the film was being shown by BBC television.

"It's generally the type of thing the commercial channel would carry," Poland explained as they entered the house to be met by a uniformed butler. "But with Hope living here now, she managed to have it shown this once without interruptions."

Nick and Gloria handed their coats to the butler. "Look at this place, Nicky!" Gloria squealed. "It's like a palace!"

Nick, who had seen the inside of Buckingham Palace, was less overwhelmed. Still, he had to admit the lady had taste. He was staring up at the multi-tiered chandelier when Hope Trennis herself appeared, sweeping down on them in a cloud of pink chiffon. "You must be one of the BBC gentlemen," she greeted Nick. "So good of you to come."

"Actually, I'm—"

“He’s a friend from America,” Felix Poland explained. “Nick Velvet. And this is his wife Gloria.”

Gloria was used to that introduction by now and she didn’t change expression. She was too busy bathing in the vision of Hope Trennis from three feet away. Nick had to admit she was a lovely woman — perhaps a bit older-looking than on the screen, but every bit as charming. Even when she turned to Poland with a brusque “I didn’t expect to see you here,” there was no noticeable bitterness in her words. Whatever had passed between them would not be allowed to ruffle her composure this night.

“Am I still invited?” Poland asked her with a smile.

“Of course. Come in and have a drink before the film gets under way. I promise not to poison you.”

He shot her a look of anger, but she’d already turned away. They followed her into a large living room where perhaps 30 people were chatting in small groups while a maid passed a tray of drinks in the best tradition. “This is really living,” Gloria whispered.

Nick felt a bit like the society thief in those old Raffles books. Glancing at the necklaces and diamond rings adorning the women, he had to remind himself that he’d come to steal nothing more valuable than yesterday’s newspaper.

Hope Trennis led them to a slender man wearing mod glasses and dark hair long enough to cover his ears. “This is my friend Eric Noble from the BBC. You know Felix, Eric, and this is Nick Velvet and his wife Gloria, over from America.”

They shook hands all around and Hope flew off to greet more late arrivals. “Your first visit here?” Noble asked Nick. No doubt it was his stock conversation gambit with visiting Americans.

“No, I was over in ’71.” Nick lit one of the infrequent cigarettes he’d been indulging in during their vacation, ignoring Gloria’s pained expression.

“You’ll find some things changed since then.” Noble motioned toward the color television set. “I suppose you’ve already seen the film?”

Nick nodded. “We caught it back in the States.”

“I’m a big fan of Hope’s,” Gloria added.

Nick left her to converse with Eric Noble while he took Poland to one side. “Where should I look first? You mentioned a safe in the study. Or should I check the dustbins first?”

His client snorted. “Picking up our British phrases so quickly, Velvet? No, it’s more likely in the safe, or somewhere else in her study. I’m sure she was sent one yesterday morning by a columnist on the paper, and I don’t think she would have destroyed it so soon. Be careful, though. If she discovers you’re after it, she could burn it

quickly enough."

"Don't worry."

Hope Trennis was at the front of the room, flanking the television set and calling for attention. "It's about to begin, ladies and gentlemen. Do be seated. After the show we'll be serving a buffet supper in the study."

Nick glanced at his watch as the lights dimmed. 9:15, exactly. That meant the film would end its hundred-minute run at 10:55, since it was playing without interruptions. He wondered why the British TV schedules always seemed so irregular. Nothing would ever begin at 9:15 back home. He settled back in his chair to watch the beginning of "100 Minutes," keeping an eye on the study door which was slightly ajar. A light was on in there, and he saw the butler and maid pass across his slender line of vision from time to time, preparing the buffet supper for later. He realized he might have no chance to slip into the study unobserved.

The film droned on and he watched a surprisingly agile Hope Trennis scale a board fence while pursued by the villains. She played the middle-aged wife of an important presidential advisor, sought by kidnapers who hoped to force her husband to deliver certain top-secret documents into their hands. It was predictable but exciting.

Nick glanced at the glowing numbers on his digital watch.

9:39.

The light in the study was still on. He had a glimpse of the maid carrying a tray of cups.

On the television screen Hope had eluded her pursuer for the moment and taken refuge in a gas station where she'd met a handsome mechanic. While Gloria watched the screen as if she'd never seen the film before, Nick grew increasingly restless. He was missing the perfect opportunity to search the study.

9:52.

As the minutes passed he decided the butler and maid intended to remain in the study until supper was served. But then, as if in answer to his silent prayer, the study light went out and the door opened. The servants slipped into the living room to watch the last half of the film.

The time was 10:05.

In the darkness no one but Gloria noticed him leave his chair and slip quietly to the back of the room. For the most part the audience watched the film in polite silence, though occasionally Hope would cause a ripple of laughter with some remark directed to her image. During one suspenseful moment Nick slipped into the darkened study and closed the door. He was certain not even the servants had noticed.

10:08. He turned on the desk lamp and set to work. He had 47 minutes to find the newspaper. Plenty of time.

If it was in the study at all.

10:15.

The desk had yielded nothing, nor had the cabinet with drawers that stood against the far wall. His eyes passed over the fireplace and a crowded bookcase, searching for the most likely hiding place for a safe.

Nick found it behind one of the paintings, in the best British tradition. As he twirled the knob experimentally he really did begin to feel like Raffles, the famous gentleman crook.

The safe was an old one, not very good. But then he wasn't a very good safecracker, either. He pressed his ear against the cold metal and listened for the sound of the tumblers.

It took him ten minutes to get the first number.

He began to sweat a bit. The time was 10:30. Could he do it in twenty-five minutes?

The second number came at 10:38. He was working close to the line. He heard a cheer go up from the next room and he knew the moment of the grand climax was approaching.

Just a few more minutes...

The safe came open at 10:51. Four minutes to spare.

He was reaching inside it just as the door opened and Eric Noble stepped into the study. The man from the BBC eyed him for an instant and quickly closed the door before others could follow. "Well! What have we here?"

The safe held nothing but a satin-covered jewel box. Nick closed the door, spun the dial, and replaced the painting. "Just keeping my hand in," he said.

"So I noticed."

The study door opened again and the butler hurried in to complete the food arrangements. The guests were crowding behind him. Nick tried to keep cool. "So the BBC dropped four minutes out of Hope's triumph?"

"Not at all," Noble said. "Oh, I see! You were working against the running time of the film. You didn't know—"

"Food's ready, everyone," Hope Trennis announced. "Be sure to pick up a glass of champagne at the end of the table."

Felix Poland came in with Gloria. He glanced over to where Nick stood, a question in his eyes. Nick ignored it and stepped to one side with Eric Noble. "You're the first thief I ever met," the BBC man said. "Out of loyalty to Hope I really should turn you in."

"I stole nothing. And there's only your word that the safe was open."

"True enough," Noble agreed. "What's your game, Velvet? You're not the usual run of thief. And you did arrive with Felix Poland." Even

as he said the words a light dawned. “Of course! That rascal hired you, didn’t he?”

“Did he?”

Gloria came up to them with a plate of food. “You’d better get in line, Nicky, before it’s all gone.”

“I don’t think Hope Trennis is likely to run out of food,” he said, but he joined Noble in line nevertheless.

“I’ll give you a tip for next time,” Noble said. “An engineering quirk of British television transmission causes an imperceptible speed-up of projection. A twenty-five-minute film loses one minute on our TV. And Hope’s ‘100 Minutes’ is a fast ninety-six minutes here.”

“So you didn’t cut anything.”

“Oh, no. You saw it all. Or I should say you would have seen it all if you hadn’t been busy cracking Hope’s safe.”

Nick gathered up a plate of food, feeling depressed. He’d been caught in the act by this man who taunted him, and he still had no idea where the newspaper was.

He watched Hope approach the butler and wave toward the fireplace. “Didn’t I tell you to burn that right away?” she asked. The butler murmured an apology and picked up a long match.

The fireplace!

Nick’s eyes shot to it, saw the folded newspaper lying on top of the wood, and knew instinctively it was the one he sought. It was valuable only to Poland, not to Hope Trennis, and she wanted it burned.

He turned quickly to Gloria and whispered, “Sorry, my dear” — and upset his plate of food down the front of her dress.

“*Nicky!”* she screamed.

The butler, half bent toward the fireplace, heard her cry, and straightened up. He blew out his match and hurried over with a napkin.

“I don’t know how I could be so clumsy,” Nick murmured. He stepped behind the butler, and while all eyes were on Gloria quickly scooped up the newspaper from the fireplace. Before he tucked it under his coat he verified the date. It was indeed yesterday’s *London Free Press.*

He went back to Gloria’s side while the butler and maid finished wiping off her dress. “How could you do that to me?” she asked.

“I’ll explain later,” he said softly. “It was necessary.”

“I don’t think this is our lucky day any more.”

“We’ll see.”

They departed soon afterward, with Hope Trennis seeing them to the door. She seemed suspicious of something, but uncertain of what it was. “I hope you enjoyed the evening,” she said.

"It was most profitable," Felix Poland assured her. "You'll be hearing from me."

The actress smiled thinly. "Not too soon, I trust."

In the taxi back to the hotel Nick handed over the paper. "Is this what you wanted?"

Felix Poland quickly opened it to an inside page. "I'll tell you soon enough. Yes, this is the one! You do good work, Velvet."

"What's this all about?" Gloria asked.

"Your husband is an extremely accomplished thief. And you are quite an actress to distract their attention the way you did."

"What does he mean, Nicky?"

"I'll explain later."

But for Felix Poland the time for explanations was now. "You see this item in the 'Mayfair Gossip' column? The light's dim so I'll read it to you. '*Actress Hope Trennis is still mourning the apparent suicide of her best friend, Rena Poland. Trennis refuses to accept the verdict and tells friends that Rena wasn't the sort to kill herself, saying, "If there was poison in that wine, her husband probably put it there." '* End of item, beginning of lawsuit. This is going to cost Hope Trennis and the *London Free Press* one million pounds!"

"Why did you have to get that particular paper?"

"They stopped the presses and yanked that item at the very beginning of the run. They insisted no copies were distributed, but when I heard about it I knew Hope would have one if anybody did. And just one is all I need to prove publication."

"She must have known it was a foolish thing to keep. That's why she told the butler to burn it."

"The editor was asleep, allowing such an item to slip through in the first place. The British libel laws are quite strict, and no one is going to print that about me!"

Gloria and Nick got out of the cab at their hotel. "A pleasure doing business with you," Nick said.

"And you, sir."

Nick stood on the curb watching the taxi pull away. After all, his luck had held. Now if only he could explain it to Gloria...

In the elevator she said, "You always told me you worked for the government."

"Sometimes I do."

"Stealing things?"

"I—" The elevator doors slid open on their floor and he cut short the conversation. Eric Noble, the man from the BBC, was leaning against the wall by their door, obviously waiting for them. "How did you get here so fast?" Nick asked.

"My taxi driver knew a short cut. You lit your cigarette with

matches from here, so I knew where to find you. These American-owned places always have free matches."

"A regular detective!"

"That's why I'm here. May we talk inside?"

Gloria produced her key and unlocked the door. Once inside, Nick asked, "Now what's this all about?"

"Poland intends to sue Hope for libel, doesn't he?"

"You'll have to ask him."

"He really did poison his wife, you know."

"Then he won't win his case, will he?"

"The libel laws here are tricky. Sometimes truth is no defense. But that's beside the point. I'm a close friend of Hope's and I want to protect her. I don't want to see her dragged through a long libel action by that swine Poland."

"And yet you didn't sound the alarm when you found me at her safe."

"You weren't taking anything. Later, when I realized what happened while your wife diverted our attention, it was too late. Poland needed that paper, and you stole it for him."

"What about his wife? *Was* she poisoned?"

Noble nodded. "Two months ago. She and Hope were great friends and she told Hope everything. Poland wanted a divorce so he could go off with some young bird from one of the gambling clubs. They had bad scenes over money and Rena wouldn't consent to a divorce. Then one afternoon in his office she drank a glass of poisoned wine and died. The police decided it had to be suicide."

"Why?"

"Because she was alone at the time. Poland was attending a meeting on the next floor, and I was at the meeting myself to vouch for it. She poured herself a glass of sherry from the decanter in his office. His secretary heard noises and rushed in to find Rena dying on the floor. The police found poison in the glass but not in the decanter. There was no way that Poland could have poisoned the drink before it was poured, and he was still in our meeting when the news reached him."

"Yet Hope accused him."

"She shouldn't have said it, and the *London Free Press* shouldn't have printed it. But she feels strongly on the subject. She knew Rena well enough to rule out suicide completely, so she knows Poland must have killed her somehow. If he wasn't in charge of film distribution over here for her producer she never would have invited him tonight. Oddly enough, we were discussing the BBC showing of '100 Minutes' in that meeting two months ago, the afternoon Rena died."

"Tell me what happened."

"Well, I had a couple of chaps with me, and so did Poland. The meeting was scheduled for three, and the wall clock was chiming the hour as he walked through the door. I remember checking my watch against it. Poland sat at the head of the conference table and we started our meeting. It was just ten minutes later when his secretary phoned from the floor below to say that Rena had been stricken. I went down with him, but by the time we arrived she was dead."

"Did he marry the girl from the gambling club?"

"Not yet, but I expect he will after a decent interval."

"All right," Nick said. "I've listened to your story. Now what do you want of me?"

"Your help in preventing this lawsuit. I want you to go to Felix Poland tomorrow and persuade him to abandon it, or else I'll have Hope file burglary charges against you."

Gloria rushed to Nick's side. "He's no burglar!"

"When I caught him he seemed quite skilled at it."

Nick weighed the possibilities. He was certain the burglary charge would never stand up, but Hope Trennis was an important woman with important friends. He didn't want to be stuck in England for weeks or more while the charges were pending. "I'll go see Poland," he said. "That's all I can promise."

"Tomorrow morning."

"Agreed."

"And don't try sneaking out of the country."

When they were alone, Gloria said, "Nicky, you haven't been honest with me."

"Let's wait till this is over. Then I promise to tell you everything."

In the morning Nick went to Felix Poland's office. He was there shortly after ten o'clock, stopping only long enough to cash Poland's check and have the money converted into American dollars for transfer to his New York bank. The film distribution office occupied two floors of one of London's newer buildings. He found Poland on the lower floor, checking the ad layouts for a new American movie about to open in Leicester Square. The stout man seemed annoyed to see him again and sent his secretary scurrying from the office.

"Our business was concluded last night, Velvet. You have no reason to come here."

Nick glanced around the office, taking in the expensive wood paneling and the little bar where some decanters stood. That would have been where Rena Poland poured her last glass of sherry. "I'm in a bit of difficulty," Nick began. "Eric Noble caught me in the act, so to speak. He threatens to have me arrested if you institute that lawsuit."

Felix Poland folded his hands before him on the desk. "That's a

danger in your trade, I suppose. I can hardly come to your aid."

"Noble thinks you really did poison your wife."

"Would I be foolish enough to drag this whole thing into court if I had?"

"A clever man would. Or a man who thought the law couldn't touch him."

"Scotland Yard investigated the case and cleared me without question. No one — not Hope Trennis or Eric Noble or Nick Velvet — can say differently. If anyone does, I'll sue each one for a million pounds. Is that clear?"

"Certainly. But I was wondering about the exact circumstances of your wife's death."

Poland jabbed impatiently at the call button on his desk. When his dark-haired secretary appeared he told her, "Run through your testimony about my wife's death, will you, Carol? Mr. Velvet here has a great curiosity."

She glanced at Nick, perhaps wondering if he was from the police, and began. "Your wife arrived just before three, as you were leaving for your meeting upstairs. She said she'd wait in your office. I was in the outer office with two other girls, stuffing envelopes for a mailing to exhibitors. We all remember your leaving the outer office and walking to the elevator just as the clock chimed three. About five minutes later we heard a gasp or cry from in here, and we all ran in. Mrs. Poland was on the floor, apparently in great pain. I phoned a doctor on one of the lower floors and then I phoned you in the upstairs conference room. But she was dead by the time the doctor and you got here."

"The poison was in her sherry?" Nick asked.

Carol nodded. "She must have put it there herself. I'd just washed all the glasses and filled the decanter from a new bottle. There was no poison anywhere but in her glass."

"And in Mrs. Poland," Nick added.

"Well, yes."

"Satisfied?" Poland asked Nick.

"You might have left a glass of sherry already poured for her."

"But I didn't. Carol and the other girls were in and out of the office, putting together their mailing. They verified that the glasses were all empty when I left."

"The decanter could have been poisoned, and a second unpoisoned one substituted later."

"Again — no. Neither Carol nor I nor anyone else was alone in that office after the poisoning. And the police took the decanter with them at once. There was no second decanter, or hidden bottle."

"Can I go now?" Carol asked, looking uncomfortable. "I've been

over this so many times before."

Felix Poland nodded. When they were alone once more he asked, "Satisfied, Velvet?"

"I suppose I have to be."

"Rena was upset because I wanted a divorce. I've never denied that. She came here as I was leaving for a meeting, went into my private office, poured herself some sherry, and dosed it with a fast-acting poison. I suppose the idea of killing herself in my office appealed to her."

The buzzer sounded and Carol's voice was heard again. "The gentlemen from Thames Television are here for their eleven o'clock meeting."

"I'll be with them in a moment," Poland said. He stood up. "You can go out this way, Velvet. You do understand, don't you? Our business association is ended. I suggest you take the next plane home."

As the wall clock chimed the hour Nick found himself shuffled quickly out a rear door. He stood for a moment in the corridor, then sighed and headed for the elevator. It was time for a return visit to Hope Trennis' townhouse.

Though it was nearly noon when he arrived, the actress received him in her dressing gown. The servants from the previous evening were still busy cleaning up after the party, polishing silverware and vacuuming the carpets. "An unexpected pleasure, Mr. Velvet," Hope Trennis said. "Please sit down. Eric has been in touch with me, of course. You were very unlucky to be caught."

Nick smiled. "I wasn't caught, only detected. There's a difference. By this time tomorrow I'll be on a plane back to the States."

Her expression hardened at his words. "I thought Eric made your position quite clear. Have you persuaded Felix Poland to abandon his threatened lawsuit?"

"No."

"Then I'm afraid you'll be charged with burglary, Mr. Velvet."

"Of what — a day-old newspaper?"

"Eric found you with your hand in my safe."

Nick nodded. "Because your film ran four minutes shorter on British television. A few minutes can make a big difference."

"It can for you, Mr. Velvet. I have many friends at Scotland Yard."

"I'm glad to hear that, because I want you to go to them."

"With the charges against you?"

"No — with new evidence against Felix Poland in the death of his wife. Your perfect defense is to go on the offensive. Prove that he poisoned his wife and he won't be in the mood to sue you for anything."

“And how do I go about doing that?”

“As I pointed out, a few minutes can make a big difference — the few minutes less your film ran on British television, or the few minutes’ difference between two clocks. I haven’t checked the actual testimony covering the time of Rena Poland’s poisoning, but if Scotland Yard looks at it again, they’ll find an important discrepancy.

“According to his secretary, Felix Poland left his office as the clock was chiming three. And Eric Noble told me Poland walked into the meeting on the floor above as the clock was chiming three. He could hardly have gone up on the elevator and walked into the other office in a matter of two or three seconds. No, one of those clocks had to be a couple of minutes wrong. And it was most likely Poland’s, since Noble remembers checking his watch against the conference-room clock.

“But if Poland’s office clock was just a couple of minutes fast it demolishes his alibi. He could have left his office, headed toward the elevator, and then turned and reentered his private office through the rear door down the hall. Using the pretext that he’d forgotten something, he could have said a few words to his wife, poured her a glass of sherry, and gone back out the same rear door. Then up to the next floor in the elevator. Total elapsed time, two or three minutes.”

“It could have been that way,” Hope said, her eyes alight.

“The testimony of the chiming clocks will only prove that his office one was fast, but that may be enough. Most electric clocks, especially office ones, have a high degree of accuracy. If it was fast, it was probably set ahead deliberately. If Poland set it ahead, that’s evidence that he was planning an alibi.”

“Thank you for this, Mr. Velvet. You have solved the mystery. Can I pay you for it?”

He shook his head. “I’m no detective. I’m a thief. And Felix Poland has already paid me. It’s been a pleasure meeting you.”

He went back then to Gloria, because he knew after all these years that the time had come to tell her the truth. He sat with her over drinks, explaining what he did, telling her about the minimum fee he charged and the unique things he stole. And even after 13 years of living together he wasn’t certain what her reaction would be.

She sat for a long time in silence, staring at her drink, and finally he asked her, “What do you think?”

She lifted her head and smiled. “I think you should be charging at least twenty-five thousand.”

notes

Notes

1

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